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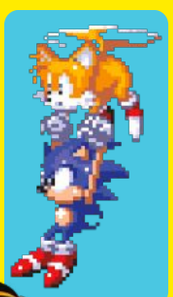

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE SONIC MOMENT?

DARRAN JONES

It's when he starred in *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*, a love letter to both Sonic and Sega games in general.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *None Shall Intrude*
Favourite game of all time: *Strider*

TIM EMPEY

When I finally got all the Chaos Emeralds in *Sonic 2* and transformed in to Super Sonic. Wheeee!
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go
Currently playing: *Beast Of Reincarnation*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

ANDY SALTER

Sonic getting impatient with you when you leave him standing still for too long in the first game.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

MARTYN CARROLL

I had slight buyer's remorse when I picked up a Dreamcast on launch day, but it soon went away when playing *Sonic Adventure*, seeing that giant orca leaping out of the ocean at the beginning was great.
Expertise: Sinclair stuff
Currently playing: *Halo: Campaign Evolved*
Favourite game of all time: *Jet Set Willy*

RORY MILNE

There are so many amazing *Sonic* moments, but my favourite is speeding up Reactive Factory's ramp in *Sonic R* into a perfect Sega blue sky with the feel-good music urging you on.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Knight Lore*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

ANDREW FISHER

Interviewing Andreas Varga about his incredible C64 *Sonic* conversion, using the REU for smooth scrolling.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: Filling the new shelves in my retro room
Favourite game of all time: *Wizball*

PAUL ROSE

It's got to be the first time I played a Special Stage in *Sonic 2*. I couldn't believe I was playing that on my Mega Drive.
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: *Assassin's Creed Black Flag Resynced*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*

GRAEME MASON

As much as I love the games, the 'cartoon' quality of the *Sonic CD* intro blew me away. I really thought the Mega-CD was the future. Pah.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Yellowcreek Stories: The Cabin Watcher*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

LOADING...

Few gaming icons are as enduring as Sonic The Hedgehog, or have appeared on Retro Gamer's cover as much for that matter. Originally debuting 35 years ago in his self-titled game, Sonic has gone on to become Sega's most important character and has starred in countless sequels and spin-offs. So for this issue we've done something a little different and created a selection of awards to reflect the best of Sonic's many games. It's a feature that Nick and I discussed after he wrote a similar article about Capcom fighting games, but it's one he sadly never got to realise.

We've not only been able to speak to a significant number of *Sonic* veterans, including Takashi Iizuka, Christian Whitehead and Steve Lycett, but have also included an Ultimate Guide to *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, meaning you're getting two great *Sonic*-related articles this month.

Outside of our extensive *Sonic* coverage we go behind the scenes of *Roller Coaster*, *Escape From Monkey Island* and *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (yes it's that old), celebrate the original *Grand Theft Auto* and revisit some of Mastertronic's best games with Rob Hubbard and Shaun Southern.

We also review the latest update of *Halo: Combat Evolved*, look at an excellent new *Tomb Raider* exhibit in Derby and chat to Keiichiro Toyama about the cult *Forbidden Siren* series. Oh, and don't miss our subscription deal on page 30.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

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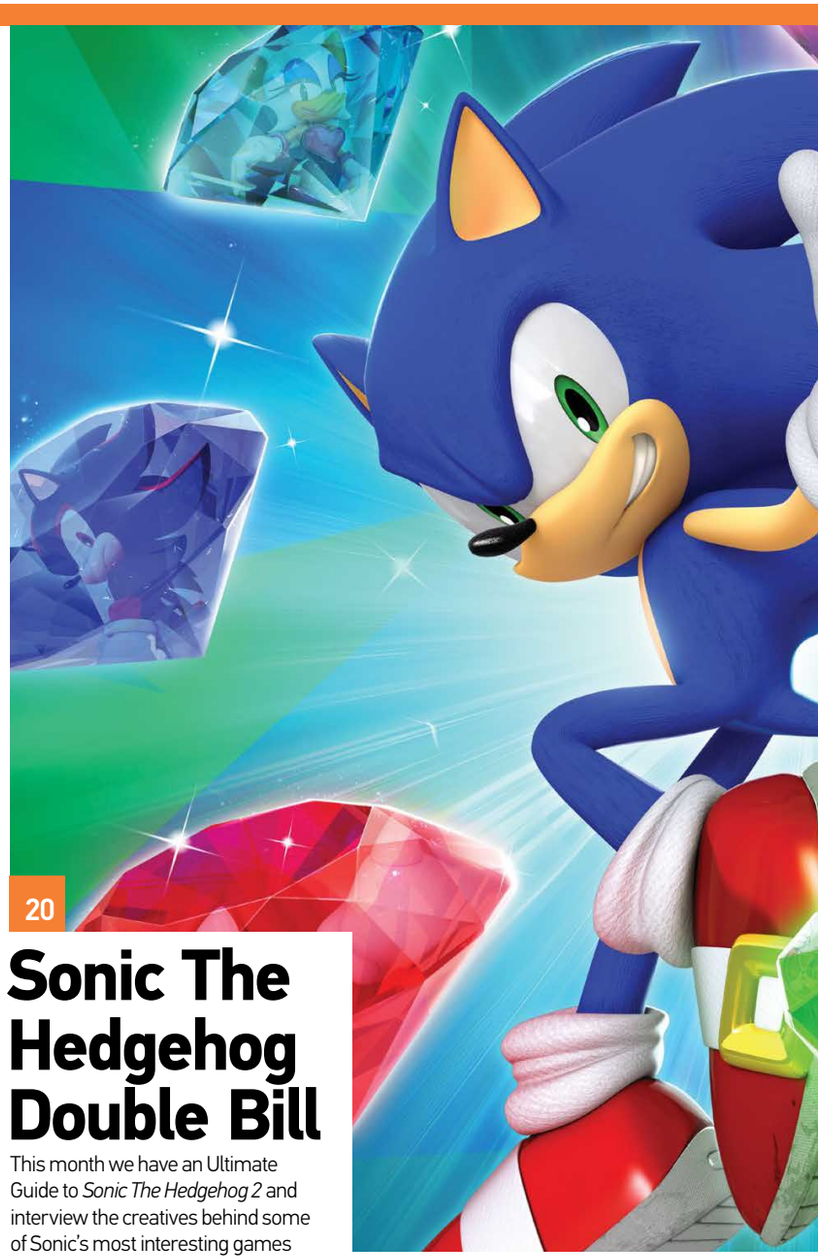

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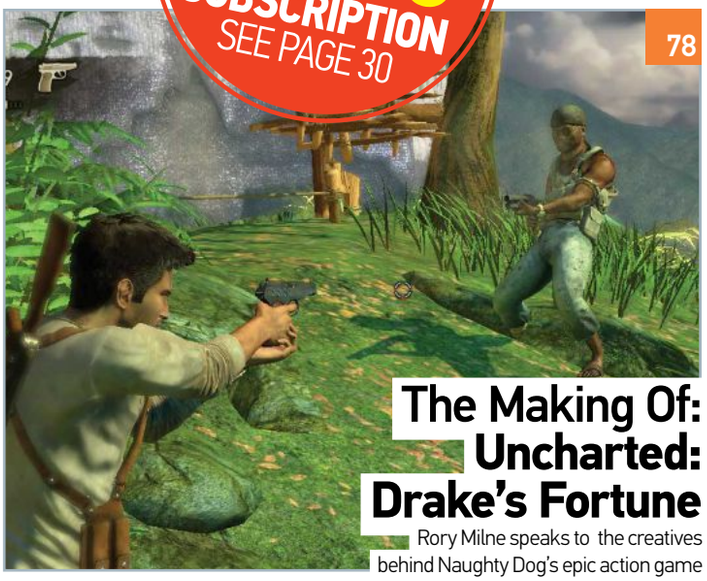
The History Of: Siren

Keiichiro Toyama revisits his ambitious survival horror series



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Which of our topics this issue will adorn the cover in a month's time?

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Martyn completes another game so you don't have to

» Cosplayer Saint Michelle (@saintmichellegames) poses near some impressive *Tomb Raider* mech.

» Luke Earle has been a fan of the *Tomb Raider* series since the age of five and used many of his own items for the new exhibit. Photo credit: ACJ Media LTD.

» *Tomb Raider IIs* 9ct Golden Mask. Only five of these beauties are known to exist.

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Martyn returns from another whistle-stop tour of the past. This month: April 1980

THE HOUSE OF LARA

Luke Earle on turning Pickford's House into a Tomb Raider shrine

Words by Darran Jones

Lara Croft is one of gaming's most enduring icons, starring in multiple games and transcending the media in a way few other gaming stars have managed. She's now the star of *Lara Croft: 30 Years On – From Derby To Global Icon*, a new exhibition by Luke Earle which runs at Derby's Pickford's House until 28 November.

Luke is a longtime fan of the series and can trace his obsession with *Tomb Raider* back to a young age. "I remember my dad coming home with the first game in 1996. As a dinosaur-obsessed five year old, seeing Lara Croft fight that T-rex is kind of ingrained in my mind."

But that isn't the only reason Luke went on to have a deep connection with the series as the school he went to was on the same road where Core's offices were situated. "We used to walk past and my mum would say, 'That's where Lara Croft lives,' which didn't really make sense at the time, as it looked a bit too small for Croft Manor."

When Rebellion closed the Core Design office Luke learned that one of the developers was selling off various items that had been salvaged from a skip. "It was *Tomb Raider*-related stuff, awards, that sort of thing. I was like, 'This stuff needs to stay in Derby.'" That decision led to Luke amassing quite the collection of *Tomb Raider* paraphernalia, and as Lara's 30th anniversary arrived, he came up with an idea.

Luke started running an annual *Tomb Raider* event, which would attract up to 1,000 guests from all over the world. "[People would come to Derby from] places like America, Brazil and Europe. It was a pilgrimage of sorts to see where it happened, see where it was created." That interest ultimately went one step further, with Luke teaming up with Dan Webber and the Derby Museum team to turn Pickford's House into Croft Manor for a few months, with rooms dedicated to various relics and games from the series.

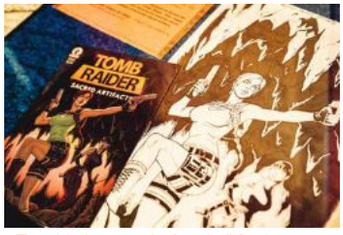
"Pickford's House is a grade one listed Georgian townhouse," explains Luke, "so from the get-go it kind of felt natural to place [the exhibit] in that space." Various rooms were created and the end result focusses not just on the early days of Core Design, but also the work of Crystal Dynamics, which has now been the custodian of the series longer than Core was.

In addition to recreating *Tomb Raider III*'s trophy room and being on the same road as Core Design's original offices, Luke and the rest of the team have added other extras to enhance the experience of visiting. "We've added cosplay days," he confirms, "so people can use the

» From left to right, Richard Morton, Andy Sandham, and Tom Scutt enjoying the original *Tomb Raider*.

» This impressive handmade costume is by cosplayer Rachel Marie (@_athora__)

» Various items used to create the early *Tomb Raider* games are on show at the exhibit.



» The original cover art by Antonio di Caprio alongside *Sacred Artifacts #3*.

» Here's the PVM, as well as other items Derek Leigh-Gilchrist used at Core Design.

space for photos and sort of recreate their own Croft Manor as well."

Another nice aspect of the exhibit is there's no cost of entry, although visitors are obviously free to make donations. "Derby's museums work on the basis of 'Pay what you think' because art should be accessible to everyone," explains Luke. "We want people to learn about *Tomb Raider*'s association with Derby but also the impact Lara's had on videogames, movies and comics. If people feel like they want to give something, that's great, but we've secured funding, so the costs have been covered for this exhibition."

For many, the biggest reason to visit the exhibit is the large amount of *Tomb Raider* memorabilia which will be available to view there, and much of it is from Luke's own personal collection, which includes roughly 400 items. Additional items have been donated by developers like Derek Leigh-Gilchrist. "He's loaned us his original Core Design computer which he worked on from *Tomb Raider* up to *Tomb Raider 5*," Luke tells us. "That computer also had the final source code for those *Tomb Raider* games and was supplied to Aspyr to help with the remasters in 2024 and 2025. It's a very important PC because you could argue that without it we might not have easily gotten the remasters."

Additional loans from Derek include his PS1 Net Yaroze, various dev kits for both the PlayStation and PS2, while the Barbican has also shared some impressive heirlooms. "We've had an amazing loan of the BAFTA which Core Design won in 1999 for their contribution to the interactive entertainment industry," reveals Luke, who loves the fact that so many working pieces of history are on show for everyone to enjoy. "It's like having Van Gogh's paintbrush in some ways, you know the thing he actually worked on to make the thing happen."

As mentioned, the exhibit covers the last 30 years of *Tomb Raider*, which means plenty of focus on the games by Crystal Dynamics. Luke tells us that the developer has been incredibly helpful. "Crystal Dynamics' games are definitely more in the zeitgeist now than those [Core] games were. They've been amazing. They're currently remaking the first game as *Legacy Of Atlantis* and they've been really supportive, providing assets for those later games such as concept art."

So what makes Lara so enduring? What makes a *Tomb Raider* exhibit so appealing? "Well she's never really been away in the last 30 years," Luke says, "whether it's in games, movies, comics or books. She's a little bit like Doctor Who in that way. Like everyone's got their own Doctor, everyone's got their own Lara." ✱

***Lara Croft: 30 Years On: From Derby To Global Icon* is now showing at Pickford's House. Get more info at bit.ly/lara_museum Photography by Ash Stanley of A S Studios.**

IMMORTALISING LARA CROFT

In addition to his *Tomb Raider* exhibit, Luke Earle has also started a Kickstarter campaign to hopefully restore a Lara Croft statue to stand in Derby Market Hall (it was originally used for London's *Tomb Raider Experience* between 2021 and 2023). £30,000 is needed to secure, move and restore the statue to its original glory. More information can be found at bit.ly/lara_statue

NEW GAMES PLANNED BY COMMODORE

It's been a year since the return of the Commodore brand and the publisher is celebrating its anniversary with plans for brand-new games. The new initiative is being called Made For U(ltimate)and will feature games that take full advantage of the Commodore 64 Ultimate's unique capabilities. Interested in Commodore's plans? There's a survey you can fill out at bit.ly/c64_survey

Who is Mike Mika?
Mike Mika's official videogame career began in the Nineties, working on Game Boy Color titles like *Klax* and *Alice In Wonderland*. He's now the studio head of Digital Eclipse, a studio acclaimed for its reverential treatment of classic games.

The Computer People

Not too far from my house stood a peculiar building we'd drive past from time to time called the Elks Lodge, home to the Benevolent Order Of The Elks. It was the source of all kinds of neighbourhood legends and one of my favourite places on Earth.

Once a month, its banquet hall became home to the Richard Nagy Computer Show. Looking back, it seems like an unlikely place for a bunch of people interested in computers to gather. But that's exactly where my future quietly assembled itself.

For one weekend every month, that ordinary hall became extraordinary. Rows of tables overflowed with Atari computers, Commodores, Apple IIs, floppy disks, joysticks and ham radios – because that was the overlap of this oddball community. Computer enthusiasts were often ham radio operators, World War II veterans, miniature railroad hobbyists and electronics tinkerers who had discovered personal computers before everyone else.

To most, it was a place to buy hardware. For me, it was the place I found my people. I was usually the youngest person in the room. Nobody cared. If you were curious, you belonged. My lungs also managed to absorb a lifetime's supply of second-hand cigarette smoke. I still remember the regulars.

The Ziplock Games Guy always arrived with two Commodores and a table stacked with pirated software sealed inside carefully assembled Ziplock bags. Five dollars a game. Three for ten. Every once in a while he'd have something you simply couldn't find anywhere else.

Then there were the sysops. The operators of Detroit's bulletin board systems had spent years fighting little turf wars over who had the best warez, utilities and text files. Their users had fierce loyalties. Eventually some linked their boards into a network, creating what felt like Detroit's first online superpower. At Nagy's show they'd sit together, chain-smoking while debating troublesome users and the future of their little online empire. I admired them from a safe distance. To me, they were the high council of computing.

My favourite tables, though, belonged to people who weren't really vendors at all. They were just cleaning out their basements. Ultimately, it was far more than a trade show.

It was a community.

Today, if I need help solving a programming problem, I have millions of experts a few keystrokes away. I can search forums, watch tutorials, ask AI or join a Discord server with people from every corner of the world. The Internet has made knowledge wonderfully democratic.

But it also changed something. Before computers connected the world, they connected people.

If you wanted to learn assembly language or calibrate a stubborn disk drive, you had to leave the house. Knowledge lived in church basements, VFW halls, Elks Lodges, after-school computer clubs and neighbourhood computer stores. It lived in mimeographed newsletters and photocopied tutorials. People like Richard Nagy built churches where people like us could gather. The social network was the room.

Only recently did I realise the Elks Lodge had been built for fellowship long before anyone imagined personal computers. In the end, its purpose never really changed. The reason people gathered simply evolved.

That thought came rushing back when I visited the Vintage Computer Festival this year. Beneath the piles of hardware and aging peripherals I found something I hadn't expected to appreciate so much: old user-group newsletters, community software disks and faded flyers advertising long-forgotten computer shows.

Those newsletters aren't just paper anymore. They're proof these communities existed at all. We're right to preserve the software. That's part of our cultural history. But I hope we also preserve the people, the stories and the gathering places that made it all possible.

The first social network I ever joined wasn't online. It met once a month at the Elks Lodge. It's where I found the Computer People, and they've been my people ever since. *

> "Today, if I need help solving a programming problem, I have millions of experts a few keystrokes away"

Photo credit: Vintage Computer Festival Socal

Do you agree with Mike's thoughts? Contact us at:

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OG XBOX ON PC

MICROSOFT BRINGS FOUR ORIGINAL XBOX GAMES TO PC. MORE PLEASE!

If you have an Xbox Series S/X, you'll know one of its best features is its backwards compatibility, letting you play a select library of OG Xbox and Xbox 360 games with boosted framerates and better performance. So we were delighted when Microsoft surprise-announced that four original Xbox games are now on PC for the first time: *Blinx The Time Sweeper*, *Fuzion Frenzy*, *Conker Live & Reloaded*, and *Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge*. All four can be bought or come with each tier of Xbox Game Pass.

» [PC] *Crimson Skies* is genuinely excellent, and *Conker* is worth a look for Rare fans.

They've launched with customisable graphics settings, resolution upscaling, VSync support, and more. Plus they'll be getting achievements in the coming months. We'd argue successfully completing a level in the slog that is *Blinx* is an achievement in itself.

Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge and *Conker Live & Reloaded* aside, these four games are hardly classics. But the Xbox backwards compatibility program launched on Xbox One with a pretty slight line-up, too. That service went from strength to strength and now has a massive library, making the Xbox Series S/X a surprising retro powerhouse.

Xbox has promised this is just the beginning of its plans to "preserve XBOX games from the past and bring them to PC over time". *Burnout 3: Takedown* would make us weep tears of joy. Namco's Breakdown would also be very welcome, if only so more people got a taste of how bizarre an Xbox exclusive could be. So what OG Xbox games do you want to see on your PC? Write in and let us know.

ATARI MOVIES INCOMING

CENTIPEDE: THE MOVIE APPARENTLY AN ACTUAL THING THAT MIGHT HAPPEN

If we were responsible for the infamous *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* videogame, we'd probably stay away from movies forever. But Atari has boldly announced plans to turn ten of its games into movies. *Asteroids*, *Adventure*, *Berzerk*, *Breakout*, *Centipede*, *Crystal Castles*, *Millipede*, *Missile Command*, *Pong* and *Yars' Revenge* are all planned. Did Christopher Nolan only begrudgingly agree to direct *The Odyssey* in the hopes of getting to make his dream *Millipede* movie? Possibly, and while some of these games lend themselves to the silver screen more than others, we're definitely intrigued. Intrigued enough to pay to see *Pong: The Movie*? Hmm…

Atari is partnering with film production company Entertainment 360 and has signed a deal with Universal Pictures. "For more than five decades, Atari has created games and worlds that have remained part of popular culture long after their original release," Atari chairman and CEO Wade Rosen told Hollywood news site Deadline. "We are excited to work with Universal and Entertainment 360 to bring the spirit of our iconic brand and games to a new medium." The first film will apparently be a large-scale action adventure with a script by Matt Reilly and Carl Hampe, the latter having worked as a producer on *Jungle Cruise* and 2019's *Hellboy* reboot (er, third time's the charm?). After The *Super Mario Galaxy* movie made over a billion dollars, videogame adaptations are definitely a big deal in Hollywood, even if we're a little sceptical we'll be seeing *Berzerk* on the big screen… *

» [Atari 2600] The latest *Star Wars* flopped, but could *Yars' Revenge* be box office gold?

ANALOGUE^{3D} UPDATE

The Analogue^{3D} was already an excellent way to enjoy your N64 games, and now its latest update has made it even better. It introduces internal graphical upscaling, which "enhances detail and clarity while remaining faithful to the original hardware rendering process". Essentially it gives a welcome graphics boost to your N64 classics. And you can show off the difference, as the update finally adds a screenshot grabber, too. Taking snaps of *Pokémon Snap* has never looked nicer.

LEGO DONKEY KONG ARRIVES

Buying an actual *Donkey Kong* arcade cabinet is a fine way to earn a few nasty letters from the bank. Luckily, Lego has announced its latest set is an ace 1,347-piece reconstruction of the great ape's original adventure for £149.99. Pixel art and Lego snap together as perfectly as the iconic Danish bricks, making this a fantastic-looking build we can't wait to assemble. You might wanna keep it out of sight of *Bananza* fans who are unaware that Pauline and DK didn't always have such a great working relationship, mind.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Kinect the dots

For those of you who don't know, I used to be on the telly. I did a programme a million years ago called *The 11 O'clock Show*. Yes, you can blame me for Ali G and Ricky Gervais. They seemed like good ideas at the time. I can only apologise but there are no refunds. I also did other bibs and bobs including *I'm A Celebrity* where I genuinely believed I was going to die in what I thought was a stunt gone wrong. I was 200 feet up in the air and told that if I jumped up to grab a star, I would hang there. Ant, Dec and the producers SWORE TO ME I could not fall. Of course, I fell. In my head I'm dying. Turns out it was a bungee rope and everyone had lied! Brilliant! What fun!

I don't do so much television any more. Partly because I am wary of being put in life-threatening situations, but also because I messed it up. I had the keys to the kingdom and threw them away.

After a few years of not performing or doing anything showbiz adjacent (I mainly work in mental health now), I've started doing live shows. Some in theatres and comedy clubs, some in people's living rooms. I've got a bit of negative press around this. *The Sun* says I am "forced to flog" these shows for £350 – implying I'm down on my luck and desperate. I'm neither of those things. The money is handy and I'm having a blast.

What has this got to do with retro, video and/or computer games? I went to the home of a fan a few weeks ago. His daughter had booked me as a surprise birthday party guest. There's always the fear that it's a joke, and the person actually hates me, but no, he was genuinely surprised (in a good way) to see me. He had a lovely house and as I was plugging my laptop in, I noticed he had an Xbox 360 set up. Not in a retro or ironic way. As in a that was his console way.

"Do you still use this?" I asked. "Yeah, fairly often," was the reply.

What made this even more astounding was the fact a Kinect was plugged in all ready to go. We chatted about gaming and he said he still used the Kinect and that he really enjoyed it.

I don't think I've ever met anyone who has utilised the Kinect more than twice before thinking it was a bit pony and shoving it in a box and forgetting about it. And yet here was a chap who loved it. He'd found the console and utilities that worked for him and stuck with them. He'd jumped out of the console wars and was very happy. PlayStation getting rid of physical media, Xbox absolutely soiling the bed in recent years – none of these things concerned him.

I was tempted to play some *Gears Of War* with him but sadly another show in another living room was calling. The next couple were sex people, and it got awkward, but I shall save that story for another day... *

> "He had a lovely house and as I was plugging my laptop in, I noticed he had an Xbox 360 set up"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000

I need to flag this up

Like plenty of you, I'm sure, I decided to dive back into *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* when Ubisoft released the *Resynced* remake. *Black Flag* – and I find this terrifying – was released in 2013. I don't know whether that's long enough ago for it to be considered retro, not least because it feels like I played it yesterday. But… that's getting on for a decade and a half.

When I was writing Digitiser for Teletext – I'm pretty sure we were one of the first, if not the actual first, outlets to rereview old games in our Old Game: Here feature – games that had come out 13 years earlier felt like relics from another world. Digital fossils from an era only half-remembered.

Digi was born in 1993. Among the heavy hitters that year were *Doom*, *Star Fox* (*Starwing* if you're from the UK), *Gunstar Heroes*, *The 7th Guest*, *Mortal Kombat II* and *Day Of The Tentacle*. It was also the year the Mega-CD launched in Europe. A decent year for gaming all round.

By comparison, 1980 gave us *Space Invaders* on the Atari VCS and Nintendo's first Game & Watch, *Ball*. The ZX Spectrum was still two years away. How can the gap between *Ball* and *Sonic CD* be exactly the same as the one between *Black Flag* and *Black Flag Resynced*?! I mean, have you watched comparison videos of the two versions of *Black Flag*? Sure, the newer one looks better, but the original still holds up remarkably well.

Generational leaps in hardware have become pigeon steps. Showing someone in 1980 something like *Night Trap* would have been akin to demonstrating self-driving taxis to a Neanderthal!

> "Showing someone in 1980 something like Night Trap would have been akin to demonstrating self-driving taxis to a Neanderthal!"

And yet… something must have changed, because I've not been enjoying *Resynced* as much as I thought I would. I've long remembered *Black Flag* as one of my favourite games of all time – a proper top three-er. But perhaps I shouldn't have gone back. The gameplay doesn't hold up quite as well in 2026 as I expected. I actually preferred the more recent *Assassin's Creed* games, even while telling myself, "Well, they're no *Black Flag*…"

This isn't the first time it's happened. Returning to some of my favourite childhood games has often been an exercise in disappointment, but they're wrapped in enough youthful nostalgia that it doesn't matter. The primitive graphics, sound and painful gameplay are all part of the experience.

Black Flag feels much more recent, yet still belongs to a generation or two ago in game-design terms. I've no nostalgia to fall back on. Playing *Resynced* has felt like watching a video of yourself from a decade ago. You may feel you've not changed all that much, yet there'll be enough little tells to reveal that you were still a kind of proto-version of yourself – a work in progress – for it to feel weird.

Maybe by 2060 enough time will have elapsed for *Black Flag* to be covered in these pages. If I'm still alive by then, I'll give it another play and let you know whether the nostalgia has kicked in yet. *

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK | retrogamermag.bsky.social | @RetroGamer_Mag | retrogamer@futurenet.com

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Master the Realm

26 MAY 2026

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» [PC] In *Ninja Master's*, players can switch between armed and unarmed combat in an instant.

SNK

We talk to the creatives behind the Neo Geo rereleases now available on Steam

Words by Martyn Carroll

Following the recent announcement that SNK has released two more Neo Geo fighting games on Steam – 1995's *World Heroes Perfect* and 1996's *Ninja Master's* – we caught up with series producer Laurent Vernézy and director Lionel Ackah to find out what they have in store for fighting game fans.

What's the reasoning behind bringing *World Heroes Perfect* to Steam as opposed to the earlier games in the series?
We decided to release *World Heroes Perfect* first over the other instalments as we believe that the fourth and final instalment in the *World* series is the most complete and balanced entry, and the best fit for online and competitive battle. While previous instalments introduced unique mechanics that were later used in other fighting games, *World Heroes Perfect* focusses on game mechanics that give any character chances to win and change the outcome of battles at any time.

***Ninja Master's* is a deep cut compared to the likes of *Samurai Shodown* or *Fatal Fury*. Why choose to bring it back now?**
With its deep mechanics allowing any character to arm, unarm, or lose their weapon, but also to have success with multiple combo chains, *Ninja Master's* has endless ways to be enjoyed. It also has charismatic characters and very unique lore based on an alternate Jipang world. With its new release on Steam, we are looking forward to seeing characters being discovered or rediscovered, with plenty of quality-of-life features for a unique experience. In summary, we decided to rerelease these two fighting games as we felt that with their mechanics, the balance between the characters, and the charisma of every character, they needed to be known by a lot more players.

Is Code Mystics still working behind the scenes on the emulation for these games?
Yes, we can confirm that Code Mystics handled the development of these two titles, delivering the original games with additional bells and whistles on top. As a result, they are the best possible versions, presented as ultimate versions of *World Heroes Perfect* and *Ninja Master's*.

Can you elaborate on the quality-of-life enhancements that will be added to the games? Can we expect rollback netcode for example?
Both games will offer very solid online rollback netcode, so players can play smoothly against opponents regardless of the distance and connection quality between them. The games will also offer online lobbies available for up to nine players, tournaments, Achievements, leaderboards and even more features for the best game experience possible.

» Lionel Ackah serves as director of SNK's modern ports of retro classics.

» Lead producer Laurent Vernézy brings *World Heroes Perfect* and *Ninja Master's* to Steam.

» [PC] Fill your power bar to activate Hyper mode. This has not ended well for your opponent.

» [PC] Although it's slower, armed mode in *Ninja Master's* gives you increased reach.

Will these games be part of the *Premium Selection Series* like *Real Bout Fatal Fury* was?
Yes, they will be released as the third and fourth titles in SNK's existing Neo Geo *Premium Selection Series*. Stay tuned for further classic releases from SNK, each offering as many options and features as possible to deliver the ultimate experience.

Is there a reason why you've largely been focussing on one-on-one fighters for your most recent rereleases?
These rereleases are not especially focussed on versus fighting games, but more on the return of Neo Geo classics such as *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2* and *Kizuna Encounter: Super Tag Battle*. These titles didn't really have the chance to come to Steam until now with as many options as possible, compared to very well-known titles such as *Garou: Mark Of The Wolves* and *The King of Fighters 2002* already released a few years ago. Therefore, the current *Premium Selection* line-up will not necessarily concentrate solely on versus fighting games in the future but will keep focusing on rereleasing Neo Geo classics that didn't have the chance to be ported to Steam previously.

> "Neo Geo games were the pinnacle for 2D games and they still look beautiful to this day"
>
> **SNK**

» [PC] *World Heroes Perfect* is regarded by many fans as the high point of the *World Heroes* series.

There's a number of great games on Steam like *Metal Slug*, *Twinkle Star Sprites* and *Shock Troopers* that would really benefit from some quality-of-life upgrades. Can we expect to see these tackled in the future?
Our fans should stay tuned for more ports of Neo Geo titles from other game genres. Please let us know which titles you would like to see added after *World Heroes Perfect* and *Ninja Master's*. We may then adapt our future road map in line with the games most desired by fans. We would greatly appreciate hearing your thoughts on which titles you would like to see brought back, complete with all the enhancements expected by Neo Geo fans.

Why do you think Neo Geo games remain so popular with today's gamers?
These titles were made in the Nineties, a time when Neo Geo games were played and enjoyed for the first time in the arcades and at home. They're a great fit for players who want to enjoy games where multiple bouts can be played rapidly. Neo Geo games were the pinnacle for 2D games and they still look beautiful to this day. The games were mostly developed to be played with others and are highly suitable for a good time with and against friends. We are looking forward to hearing and reading feedback about *World Heroes Perfect* and *Ninja Master's* when gamers both old and new play these hidden gems. ✱

» [PC] The games feature a variety of display options, including borders with character artwork.

» [PC] *World Heroes Perfect* features a diverse – and often bizarre – roster of characters.

» [PC] By building up your Hero gauge you can unleash devastating attacks on your opponent.

BACK TO THE EIGHTIES

» The limited-edition *Super Mario Bros* G&W released in 2020 features a version of *Ball* starring Mario.

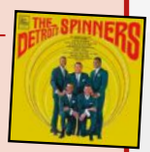
APRIL 1980 – Probably best known for arcade games like Sheriff and Radar Scope, Nintendo leans on its toy heritage this month to release a device that will help change its fortunes

THE MONTH'S HIGHLIGHTS

IN THE WORLD

News In Brief

British film director Alfred Hitchcock dies on 29 April, aged 80. A six-day siege of the Iranian embassy in London begins on 30 April. Alton Towers in Staffordshire opens as a theme park on 4 April, featuring the UK's first double-inverting roller-coaster, the Corkscrew.



IN THE CHARTS

Spinning To The Top

The Detroit Spinners top the UK singles chart this month with *Working My Way Back To You*. Blondie is in second spot with *Call Me*. Meanwhile, metal band Iron Maiden releases its eponymous debut album on 11 April. It will climb to fourth position on the UK album chart.

IN THE CINEMA

Kramer Cleans Up

Kramer Vs Kramer wins five top awards at the 52nd Academy Awards on 14 April, including Best Picture, Best Director (Robert Benton) and Best Actor (Dustin Hoffman). Its awards success sees the film climb to the top of the UK box office for much of the month, grossing £2.5 million.

APRIL 1980

Nintendo plays Ball with a new range of handheld games

On 28 April, Nintendo releases the first Game & Watch device in Japan. The game is *Ball*, and the technology is developed by Gunpei Yokoi, head of Nintendo's R&D1 department. Yokoi was inspired after seeing a man playing with a calculator on a train in 1978 and begins to plan a gaming system using similar technology – a simple liquid-crystal display powered by affordable button cell batteries. The feeling within Nintendo was that the device was too simple, but Yokoi worked with electronics giant Sharp to develop the display and 4-bit CPU to power the system. Game & Watch is coined due to the device also featuring a digital clock.

» From humble beginnings… Nintendo launches the Game & Watch range with *Ball* this month.

Ball is a very simple game, befitting its status as a proof of concept for the Game & Watch line. The player controls a nameless character – latterly Mr Game & Watch – who must juggle balls, moving left and right so that he doesn't drop any. There are two game modes: in Game A he must juggle two balls, and in Game B the number increases to three. *Ball* is originally planned as a one-off, but Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi sees the potential and asks Yokoi to devise more game ideas. Before the year is out, *Ball* will be followed by *Flagman*, *Vermin*, *Fire* and *Judge* – the five titles that make up the original Silver series (named after the colour of the device's faceplates). Sales will increase as the game concepts evolve, with *Vermin* and *Fire* going on to sell 1 million units.

And this is just the start. Game & Watch will generate significant earnings for Nintendo and become its biggest global gaming success to date. In total, 60 titles will be released between 1980 and 1991, and sales will reach 43.4 million. Nintendo doesn't forget the importance of *Ball* and the game will be rereleased multiple times over the years. Of course, its true legacy is far greater. The range's continued popularity prompts Yokoi to pursue a new handheld that supports interchangeable cartridges – the Game Boy – which will launch exactly nine years to the month after *Ball*'s debut. ✱

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF APRIL 1980

CBM Teases TOI

Byte reports from the Winter Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas where Commodore reveals a prototype of the TOI (The Other Intellect). The colour computer is aimed at the low-end market, coming with BASIC and a modulator for connecting it to a standard TV. The TOI will become vapourware, but the idea behind it will go on to shape the VIC-20.

PCW Reviews The ZX80

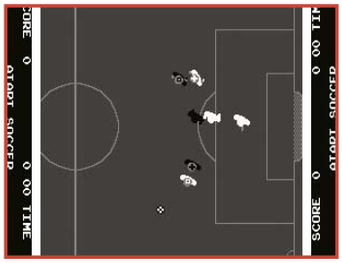
Following its release in January, the magazines are only just getting around to testing the ZX80, Sinclair's sub-£100 home micro. *Personal Computer World* is impressed. "It's a fine machine on which to learn about computers," writes David Tebbutt. "I hope Mr Sinclair can cope with the expected flood of orders and, more importantly, the after sales service…"

Rains Rises

Coin Connection announces that Atari has appointed Lyle Rains as its director of engineering. Rains joined Atari in 1974 shortly after graduating from the University Of California and has had a hand in many of the firm's biggest arcade games, including *Tank*, *Sprint 2* and *Atari Football*. Most recently he co-designed *Asteroids* with Ed Logg.

Ad Enough?

Want a clear sign of how big the micro boom is in the UK right now? Pick up the April edition of *Practical Computing* and you'll have to flick through 50 pages of full-page advertisements before you find the first page of editorial content. Overall, the issue features more than 120 advertisers. Publisher IPC Business Press must be making a pretty penny…

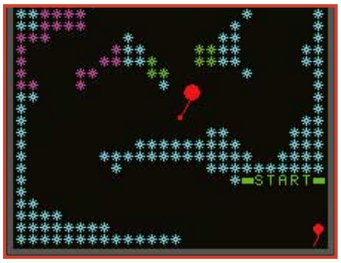


Stateside Soccer

Following its successful introduction across Europe during 1979, Atari brings *Atari Soccer* to the United States. The game is available in 2 or 4-player configurations and features trackball controllers. It is one of Atari's final games to utilise a monochrome display.

Street Racer

Atari also brings *Monte Carlo* to arcades this month. Playing similarly to its 1977 racer *Super Bug*, the game competes with Sega's *Monaco GP*, another game based on the famous Formula 1 race. At least this one features corners and not just one never-ending straight.



Balloon Goes Pop

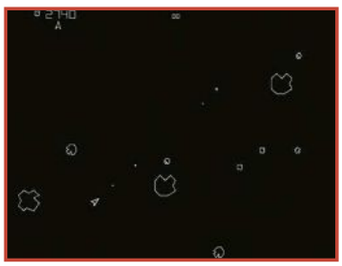
Taito looks to move away from space shooters and widen its range with this arcade skill game. The aim is to guide your balloon to the goal while avoiding the spikes that line your route. The little-known game will be included in the *Taito Legends 2* collection in 2006.

Sub Shooter

Data East's spin on *Space Invaders* introduces a nautical theme. Controlling an underwater submarine, you must target the alien invaders who swarm just above the surface. Occasionally one of the braver aliens will dive into the water and attack you in the depths.

Rake The Moon

Nothing to do with the 1979 *Bond* movie, *Moon Raker* from Nichibutsu is yet another product of the *Space Invaders* craze, which shows no sign of dying down. Interestingly, the game's ROM won't be dumped until 2025. The preservation effort never ends…

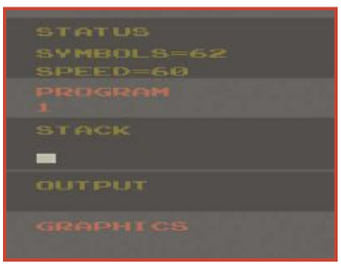


Asteroids Hit Japan

Asteroids has become the biggest-selling coin-op in the US since its release in late-1979. Now Atari's shooter arrives in Japan, courtesy of Taito and Sega. Unfortunately, the game lands with a thud in the region. Japanese gamers are tiring of space shooters it seems.

Godzilla Stomps PET

Included with the cassette-based 'magazine' *Cursor* this month is *Godzilla!*, a strategy game developed by Randall Lockwood for the Commodore PET in which you have to save Tokyo from the King Of Monsters. The game will be remade for the Commodore 64 in 1983.



Beyond Basic

Developed by Warren Robinett of *Adventure* fame, BASIC Programming for the Atari 2600 is designed to teach coding using a reduced dialect of BASIC. It's an interesting idea, but it's tricky to write proper programs when you're limited to a maximum of 11 lines of code.

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The Way Of The Exploding Fist

A LOAD OF OLD BULL

RETROREVIVAL

» COMMODORE 64 » 1985 » BEAM SOFTWARE

I guess there was one in every school: a kid who was always fibbing about games. You know the kind of person: if you had *Last Ninja 2* for Christmas, they had *Last Ninja 8*. In my school his name was Lee and he was full of stories. I remember him telling me how in *Spy Hunter*, if you got really far in the speedboat, it transformed into a plane. I believed him and played the game non-stop, trying to achieve this hopeless feat. He told me that if you scored 999 points in the *Donkey Kong* Game & Watch game, you got to take control of Donkey Kong himself. Again, I believed him. He was pretty persuasive. He also told me how in *The Way Of The Exploding Fist*, if you did really well you got to *fight a bull*. I had the Spectrum version on a compilation and I hammered it… alas, there was no bull to be found anywhere in the game. Cheers Lee. Nice one mate.

Except, this was the one time Lee wasn't lying. There *is* a bull in *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* – at least in the Commodore 64 version. And just like Lee claimed, you can jump over the rampaging bull or, if you're really hard, knock it clean out with a perfectly timed punch to its head. I only discovered the truth years later, when I first got access to the internet. The learning continued when I discussed this with Darran recently and he pointed out that the bull encounter was originally from Data East's arcade game *Karate Champ*. *Exploding Fist* borrowed heavily from this influential coin-op, going as far as nicking its bovine-themed bonus round.

So, Lee, I guess I owe you an apology for claiming that your story was a load of old bull. But I'm still not convinced that your uncle worked for Nintendo. ✱

CELEBRATING SONIC

THE HALL OF FAME AWARDS

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

TO CELEBRATE THE 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF SONIC THE HEDGEHOG, WE CAST A CRITICAL EYE OVER THE SPEEDY ONE'S MANY, MANY GAMES, HONOURING THOSE THAT HAVE HELPED DEFINE THE SERIES AND KEEP IT FIRMLY IN THE SPOTLIGHT AFTER ALL THIS TIME. WHICH TITLES WILL TAKE HOME A CHAOS EMERALD, AND WHO WILL EMBARRASS THEMSELVES AT THE AFTER PARTY? LET'S SPIN DASH TO IT

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

MEGA DRIVE, 1991

And the winner is… not *Sonic 2*. In polls and roundups, the second game is almost universally chosen as the 'best' *Sonic*. The sequel seized the momentum and propelled the series forward, introducing sidekick Tails and adding the all-important Spin Dash move. It's easy to see why it's the fan favourite entry. Yet in terms of importance, this award simply has to go to the original, the game that introduced Sega's blue blur to a world that seemed to think that platform gaming started and ended with Mario.

In the battle of the mascots, Sonic was edgier than Mario, and faster. That was no more evident than in the iconic first stage, Green Hill Zone, which was designed to showcase *Sonic*'s blistering pace and expansive level design. There was more to the game than pure pace, of course, but it grabbed the attention and single-handedly drove Mega Drive sales at an opportune time for Sega. It was a killer app, a system seller. A revelation. And it still holds up, making it doubly deserving of this award. Our much-missed colleague Nick Thorpe was a lifelong *Sonic* devotee and when asked to name the number one *Sonic* game, he had no hesitation – it was, and always will be, the original.

» [Mega Drive] Speed kills! In many areas you need to slow right down in order to avoid obstacles.

» [Mega Drive] Green Hill Zone and its famous 360-degree loops instantly sold the concept of *Sonic* to gamers worldwide.

SHAPING SONIC

SONIC TEAM STUDIO HEAD TAKASHI IIZUKA REFLECTS ON A 30-YEAR CAREER CRAFTING SONIC GAMES

Can you tell us your professional history with the *Sonic* series?
I first encountered *Sonic* when I joined Sega in 1992, while *Sonic 2* was being developed. Soon afterwards I was given the opportunity to work on *Sonic 3* and could not wait to dive into creating a new game for an already iconic character. At the time, I could never have imagined that *Sonic* would remain such an important part of my life for more than three decades.

What responsibility do you feel when working on a *Sonic* game?
There is a very strong sense of responsibility because *Sonic* means different things to so many people. Some fans have followed the series since the Mega Drive era, while others discovered him through a recent game, an animated series or the films. We have to respect that history and understand what people love about Sonic, but we cannot simply repeat what has been done before. Our responsibility is to preserve his essential character including the speed, freedom, energy and attitude, while also continuing to surprise players and introducing ideas that can carry the series forward.

What's the most challenging aspect of making a *Sonic* game?
The greatest challenge is making speed feel exciting while ensuring that the player still feels in control. Sonic should move faster than characters in most other action games, but speed alone does not create an enjoyable experience. The level design, controls, camera, enemies and visuals all must work together so that players can react intuitively. There is also a creative challenge. Every game must feel like *Sonic*, but it must also offer something new. Finding the right balance between familiarity and innovation is something we consider throughout development.

Of all the *Sonic* games you've been involved with, do any stand out?
One experience I remember very fondly is the development of *Sonic Adventure 2*. After completing the original *Sonic Adventure* with a large development team in Japan, we began the next project in San Francisco with a core team of only around 11 people. Because the team was so small, everybody worked very closely together and contributed beyond the limits of their individual role. Living and developing the game overseas also exposed us to different cultures, music and environments, which influenced the personality of the finished game. It was a demanding experience, but the closeness and enthusiasm of that team made it very special to me.

Why do you think *Sonic* remains so popular after 35 years?
Sonic has a very simple and universal appeal. He is cool, energetic, optimistic and he is always moving forward. Those qualities were appealing in 1991, and I believe they remain appealing today. At the same time, Sonic has continually evolved. Each interpretation introduces something new, but Sonic's fundamental personality remains consistent. Most importantly, the fans have supported Sonic through every period of his history. Their passion, creativity and willingness to welcome new audiences have allowed him to become much more than a videogame character.

RIDICULOUS ROSTER

» [GameCube] Sonic, Tails and Knuckles form a formidable threesome in *Sonic Heroes*.

» [GameCube] The trio from the Sega 32X game *Knuckles' Chaotix* make up Team Chaotix.

SONIC HEROES

PS2, XBOX, GAMECUBE, PC, 2003

First there was Sonic, then Tails dropped in, and Knuckles climbed on board. The list of playable characters seemingly grew with every new game, so it's hardly surprising that Sonic's mates would become a mob. And it quickly got out of hand. *Sonic Dash*, the endless runner released in 2013, has a cast of 140 playable characters. Another online/mobile game from 2017, *Sonic Forces: Speed Battle*, boasts a similar number. It should be noted that both games include multiple variations of signature characters, but still, no other *Sonic* game comes close to those numbers.

If we restrict the list to mainline *Sonic* games, then the award for Ridiculous Roster must go to *Sonic Heroes*. Built around squad play, the game features four teams and each includes three characters. They are (deep breath): Team Sonic (Sonic, Tails and Knuckles from the classic 2D series), Team Dark (Shadow and Rouge from *Sonic Adventure 2*, plus new robo dude E-123 Omega), Team Rose (Amy and Cream from *Sonic Advance 2*, and Big from *Sonic Adventure*), and Team Chaotix (Espion, Charmy and Vector, all from *Knuckles' Chaotix*). All told there are a dozen playable characters at your disposal. While you could accuse Sega of stuffing the game with superfluous characters, it's cool to see the returning trio from the long forgotten *Knuckles' Chaotix*.

» [GameCube] *Sonic Heroes* features a total of 12 characters, pulled from multiple *Sonic* games.

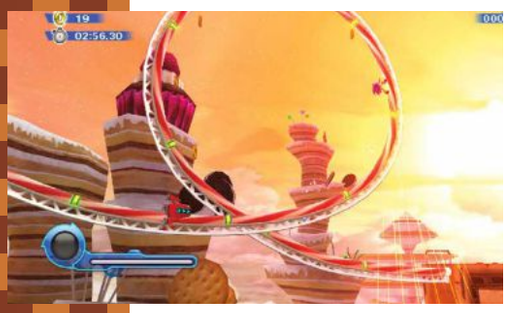
BEST 3D ADAPTATION

SONIC COLOURS

WII, 2010

This is one category that provoked a lot of debate: which of the many contenders perfected the move to 3D? *Sonic Adventure 2* is definitely on the shortlist, as are *Sonic Generations* and its recent update. But we've chosen *Sonic Colours*, the Nintendo Wii release that cleansed our palette after *Sonic The Hedgehog* (2006) and *Sonic And The Secret Rings*. It's just so well done from beginning to end, polished to perfection and featuring some of the most joyous *Sonic* stages we've ever played.

It's perhaps a contentious choice because the bulk of the game is made up of 2D sections rendered in 3D. But that's why it works so well: it melds the old and new, so it feels both familiar and fresh. You don't need to 'learn' *Sonic Colours*, beyond getting to grips with the Wisps and their different abilities. The 2021 *Ultimate* update, released to celebrate Sonic's 30th anniversary, is also recommended if you're looking for an HD visual upgrade, but it doesn't meaningfully improve on the already excellent original.



» [Wii] Hurtling through the game's 3D stages at full throttle is an absolute joy.

BEST SPIN-OFF

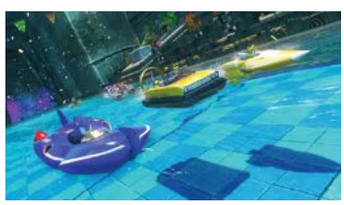
SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED

XBOX 360, VARIOUS, 2012

There have been many *Sonic* spin-offs so this is another category where we're spoilt for choice. *Sonic Spinball* deserves a mention, as do *Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine* and *Sonic Battle*. But for us, the *Sonic Racing* games leave the rest standing. Of the four titles released to date, our award goes to the awesome second entry, the mouthful that is *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*.

The original is a solid kart racer, featuring the *Sonic* gang plus a bunch of other Sega characters. *Transformed* builds on this in two important ways: vehicles can now transform (hence the title) into boats and planes mid-race, and the courses physically evolve on subsequent laps. This adds much more variety to the racing environment and the game as a whole. In addition, even more characters have been plucked from Sega's vast archive and dropped onto the starting grid, including fan favourites like Gilius Thunderhead, Joe Musashi and Ryo Hazuki – who drives vehicles modelled on Sega's sit-down arcade cabs of the Eighties. That's just one of many delightful touches that make this the perfect love letter to Sega. Above all, *Transformed* is just a really fun racer, especially in split-screen co-op.

» [Wii U] It's hardly surprising to learn that Sumo Digital based the vehicle handling on *OutRun 2*.



» [Wii U] BD Joe from *Crazy Taxi* should never have gone south of the river at this time of night.

THE FAST TRACK

SUMO'S STEVE LYCETT ON CREATING THE SONIC RACING SERIES

You'd already handled several Sega projects, but Sonic was front and centre of *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*. Did you feel an additional weight of responsibility?
Our *Out Run* and *Virtua Tennis* work was generally porting and adding online play. Even *Sega Superstars Tennis* was effectively a Sega IP coat of paint over *Virtua Tennis*' underlying gameplay. With *Sonic Racing* we were suddenly handed significant creative control and effectively put pressure on ourselves as we wanted to prove we could use what we'd learned on those games to create something new and fresh.

Is it correct that Sonic initially ran on foot and vehicles weren't really in the game?
We spent a lot of time trying to move away from the more traditional kart formula, and that included Sonic on foot, Tails in a plane, Beat skating and more. The problem was the difference in size meant it was really unbalanced. It just wasn't much fun to play. Plus, for the car gameplay we'd intentionally looked to *OutRun 2* with regards to handling and that felt really nice, so ultimately, we opted to put everyone in a car or on a bike. We did it as we needed to land something in time and on budget. Obviously, that left some particular itches unscratched…

Which you were able to scratch in the sequel, *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*?
For *Transformed*, we had so many ideas left over, especially wanting to solve flight and water sections, that the team quickly focussed on solving that and everything else was an evolution. The same core team worked on all those games, from *OutRun 2* to *Transformed*, and we lived and breathed Sega by this point. We had also worked with the same folks in Sega Europe and Sega Japan and we'd built a lot of trust and faith, so we got even more creative control. I think we made a world-class game there. It remains one of my career highlights. Sometimes I'm scared that maybe we'll never top it!

How would you sum up the experience of working on those two *Sonic Racing* titles?
Both games involved a lot of hours, travelling, collaboration and some blood, sweat and tears at times. But when I think back I just remember how much fun we had, the amount of laughter in the office, the moments that folks sat and stared and went, "We made this?" Sometimes we couldn't believe it ourselves.

» [Mega Drive] Young Tails made his debut in *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* – much to Sonic's delight, evidently.

» [Mega Drive] Tails became a lot more useful in *Sonic 3*. He could be called on to airlift Sonic.

» [Dreamcast] Tails' look was updated for his appearance in *Sonic Adventure* in 1998.

BEST SUPPORTING CHARACTER

MILES 'TAILS' PROWER

MEGA DRIVE, MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR, 1992

No surprises here. Shadow is cool and Big The Cat is an absolute alpha, but there can only be one winner and that's Sonic's original sidekick, the dashing fox cub Tails. He was introduced in 1992, in *Sonic 2* as a playable character alongside Sonic – although to be honest his impact was limited to looking cute and grabbing a few rings. His main role was to provide Sonic with a racing rival in that oddly squashed split-screen Versus mode. Tails became a fully fledged character in 1993's *Sonic Chaos* for the Master System and Game Gear. In this game you could choose to play exclusively as Tails and use his spinning twin-tails to fly or hover like a helicopter. He fulfilled a similar role in *Sonic 3* on the Mega Drive.

Tails would become the first supporting character to headline his own games – *Tails' Skypatrol* and *Tails Adventure*, both released for the Game Gear in 1995. His appearance here, along with prominent roles in other portable entries like *Sonic Triple Trouble* and *Sonic Drift*, led to Tails becoming popular with younger fans. And as they grew up, so did the character, becoming a vital and crucial companion to Sonic ever since.

BETTER IN JAPAN

» [Mega-CD] Besides Redbook audio, *Sonic CD* utilises the hardware to deliver some fancy visual tricks.

» [Mega-CD] Honey, I shrunk the Sonic. Our hero gets that shrinking feeling in the Metallic Madness zone.

SONIC CD

MEGA-CD, 1993

The Japanese releases arguably feature better cover art than their Western counterparts, but the versions themselves are mostly like for like. The one obvious exception is *Sonic CD*, where the original Japanese soundtrack was almost entirely replaced by a completely new score in the North American release. Spencer Nilsen, who composed the new music alongside David Young, has revealed that the change was requested by Sega Of America which was looking for something richer and more atmospheric than the up-tempo, dance music-inspired soundtrack that Naofumi Hataya and Masafumi Ogata had composed for the Japanese version.

There's a degree of subjectivity to take into account here. The musical approaches are different but both soundtracks have their strengths, and you could argue that the perfect score would be a mix of tracks from both (the 2022 *Sonic Origins* collection has you covered in this regard, as its version of *Sonic CD* lets you choose between the two). However, the Japanese soundtrack was the original, so for many it remains the 'definite' version. The European version does feature the original soundtrack, but the Japanese version is still preferable for one simple reason – it runs at 60Hz, meaning faster gameplay and shorter load times.

» [Mega-CD] *Sonic CD*'s smash-the-UFOs Special Stages are more than a little mind-bending.

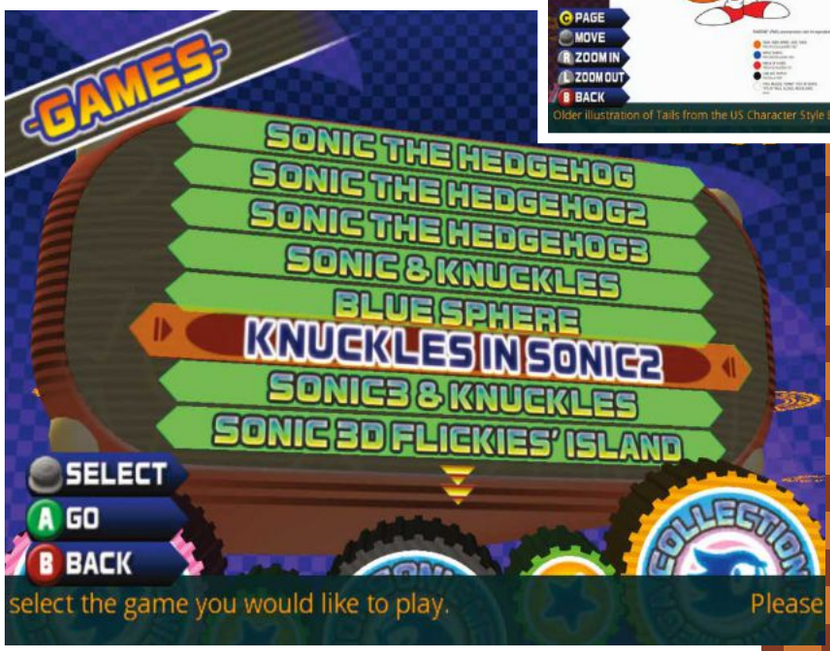
CAPTIVATING COMPILATION

SONIC MEGA COLLECTION

GAMECUBE, XBOX, PS2, PC, 2002

There are loads of *Sonic* games, so it stands to reason that they've been collected together multiple times in the past – from *Sonic Jam*, exclusively for the Saturn in 1997, through to *Sonic Origins*, the most recent, released for multiple platforms in 2022. Our award goes to the GameCube compilation *Sonic Mega Collection* due to the sheer volume of titles packed inside. It features the original through to *Sonic & Knuckles*, plus the Mega Drive spin-offs, *Sonic 3D*, *Sonic Spinball* and *Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine*. In addition, the three Lock-On games – *Blue Sphere*, *Knuckles In Sonic 2* and *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* – are all included, (although annoyingly you do need to unlock them first). It also features some other Mega Drive classics: *Flicky*, *Ristar* and, in Japan, *The Ooze* and *Comix Zone*. And, if you grab the *Plus* version released later for the PlayStation 2, Xbox and PC, you get a bunch of additional Game Gear games too.

Perhaps the most obvious omission is *Sonic CD*. For that you need the sister release, *Sonic Gems Collection*, which also features two other sought-after titles, the arcade game *Sonic The Fighters* and the Saturn racer *Sonic R*. Plus, even more Game Gear games. Phew!



» [GameCube] The collection includes the *Sonic & Knuckles* Lock-On games, as well as some non-*Sonic* titles.

COMMUNITY CHAMPION

SVEND 'DREADKNUX' JOSCELYNE-SIM TALKS SONIC FANDOM AND KINSHIP

How did you become involved with Summer Of Sonic?

Summer Of Sonic was originally a website I created to celebrate *Sonic*'s 15th anniversary back in 2006, but in the years that followed I got involved in a couple of fan meet-ups in London which attracted more people than expected. A number of us decided to club together to see if we could make a bigger event work. We started as a rag-tag band of fans hosting a large party, but over the years we became a fully professional operation with thousands of attendees.

What was it like when Sonic Team started to become involved?

Sega has been supportive of Summer Of Sonic ever since the first event. But since our third show in 2010, members of the actual Sonic Team reached out to us to get involved as special guests, which was an amazing feeling. It's a bit like having your favourite rock star come to your house and jam with your garage band. It's been really special inviting people like Takashi Iizuka, Kazuyuki Hoshino, Jun Senoue and even original Sonic co-creator Yuji Naka to our humble show, not just in terms of meeting my personal gaming heroes but also to show them in person how much their games have touched the hearts of fans around the world.

What does The Sonic Stadium website offer to Sonic fans?

The Sonic Stadium (sonicstadium.org) is best known for our active community forums, as well as being a leading source of *Sonic* news. It has also recently become a more social hub, with member rewards, interactive card-collecting games, fan clubs, art galleries and other areas where people can really show off their fandom. Fans are finding that we offer a genuine, curated and safely moderated space to connect and be part of a real community.

How important has the Sonic community been to the *Sonic* series as a whole?

I think the Sonic community is incredibly important to the franchise. This is genuinely one of the most creative and expressive fanbases in all of gaming. From incredibly detailed fan art to amazing music remixes, to some of the most impressive fan games I've ever seen… *Sonic* fans are very dedicated, and that also feeds back into the official products too, as Sonic Team responds to the concepts and characters that fans show interest in. I also think it's fair to say that the community is actually a big part of why Sonic is still relevant today.

SHRUNKEN SONIC

» [Game Boy Advance] New platforms, new places… and of course Eggman shows up in some daft contraption.

» [Game Boy Advance] Like a number of *Sonic* games, *Sonic Advance* opens in an area inspired by the classic Green Hill Zone.

SONIC ADVANCE

GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2001

Which is the best *Sonic* game for a handheld system? For many, the appeal of the *Sonic* games is tearing through amazing-looking landscapes at lightning-fast speed. Visually, this isn't the easiest thing to replicate on small handheld screens. The first game to really pull that off was *Sonic Rivals*, released for the PSP in 2006, and that alone earns it a place on the shortlist for this award. Going back to the beginning, the Game Gear ports of the first two *Sonic* games, along with *Sonic Chaos* and *Sonic Triple Trouble* all deserve praise for shrinking Sonic's world in a considered fashion, playing to the strengths of the system.

» [Game Boy Advance] *Sonic Advance* featured four playable characters, including Amy Rose and her lethal hammer

There's a lot of competition, but our award goes to *Sonic Advance*, the Dimps-developed entry for the Game Boy Advance. While Sega delivered a terrible port of the original Mega Drive *Sonic* game (in the US only) for Nintendo's handheld, it also thankfully commissioned this wonderful original title. *Sonic Advance* replicates the look and feel of the classic series, while also elevating it to new levels and making the most of the GBA's capabilities. It'd be remiss of us not to mention *Sonic Advance 2* and *3*, which further enhance the experience. But the original had already cracked the winning formula. It's the perfect *Sonic* game for a handheld system.

IMPOSSIBLE PORT

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

C64, 2021

Those who follow the homebrew scene are used to seeing new games running on old systems that boggle the mind. Even so, the sight of *Sonic The Hedgehog* on the Commodore 64, tearing across the screen at blistering speeds, is something even the most optimistic Commodore fan never thought possible. Yet here it is, thanks to the efforts of programmer Andreas Varga (aka Mr SID) and a small band of miracle workers.

There are a couple of caveats to mention. The game is based on the pared-back Master System version, rather than the Mega Drive original, and that means a slightly slower pace, less visual detail and the lack of those trademark loops. The game also requires the use of the REU (RAM Expansion Unit), in order to achieve the required scrolling speed, so it won't run on a stock C64, But still, it remains a marvellous achievement, particularly as it plays (and sounds) as well as it looks. Within seconds of starting Green Hill Zone and hearing the familiar soundtrack, you instantly forget that you're playing on hardware that dates back to 1982. The only question that springs to mind is: when can we expect *Sonic 2*?

» [C64] *Sonic* running on the C64 should be accompanied by one of those memes of someone slowly lifting up their sunglasses.

» [C64] There's so much care to detail in this port. Even Sonic in his signature pose on the title screen is spot on.

» [Switch] Running on the proprietary Retro Engine, *Sonic Mania* natively supports 16:9 widescreen presentation.

BEST COMEBACK

SONIC MANIA

SWITCH, PC, XBOX ONE, PS4, 2017

Comebacks don't always go to plan. Remember *Sonic The Hedgehog 4*, the 2010 project that was supposed to transport the series back to its glorious 2D era? Two episodes were released and the reaction was so underwhelming that the proposed third episode was canned. The mood went from despair to hope the following year with the release of *Sonic Generations*, a great return to form that married the 2D and 3D gameplay styles.

Sonic Generations is the deserved runner-up in the category, but the undoubted winner is *Sonic Mania*, a love letter to fans that could only have been created by fans themselves. The development was led by Christian Whitehead, a longtime series devotee who rose to fame creating *Sonic* fan games. Using *Sonic CD* and *Sonic 3* as the starting point, the team fashioned a follow-up that superbly recreated the classic 2D Sonic gameplay that fans had been craving in a commercial *Sonic* game. Key to its appeal are the remixed stages, which start out familiar before shifting in unexpected ways. The game was a commercial hit with sales topping 1 million after just eight months on sale – perfect justification for the team's considered approach to reviving the classic *Sonic* era.

» [Switch] Sonic and Tails negotiate the new Studiopolis Zone in the sublime *Sonic Mania*.

SONIC REBORN

SONIC MANIA LEAD CHRISTIAN WHITEHEAD ON REVIVING AN ICON

***Sonic Mania* is widely regarded as the first game to recapture the magic of the classic 2D *Sonic* games. How did you crack that code? What's the 'secret' to Sonic?**

If I had to summarise what is the 'secret' of 2D *Sonic*'s success, it's the marriage of pin-sharp character design with a 'maximalist' philosophy, both aesthetically and functionally. It's not enough for Sonic to look cool, he has to *be* cool through every interaction with him. By the time you get to *Sonic 3 & Knuckles*, there are so many setpieces and stage gimmicks that only exist for a single act, only to be discarded immediately for something else to surprise the player. And yet none of it should feel gimmicky or 'tacked on'. That level of excess is confident, a kind of cool that makes the most of *Sonic*'s pinball-style game physics. It's also worth remembering that *Sonic Mania* didn't come out of a vacuum. It was built on the back of experience shipping the remastered versions of *Sonic CD*, then *Sonic 1* and *2*. In each of those games, it was always my mission to add some fun new content that wasn't in the original releases, and Sega had been willing to wade in a little further each time. I think they helped to give both myself and Sega the confidence that we could pull off a brand-new game.

You've gone from being a fan, creating unofficial *Sonic* games, to working directly with Sega. What are the main lessons you've learnt on that journey?

Most of my lessons in game dev over the years have been more granular than grandiose, be it engine architecture decisions or workflows to better serve a team as opposed to solo development. When working with Sega it was always fascinating to hear some of the stories from the original members of Sonic Team and their experience working on past games. Some of their experiences mirrored some of the challenges we faced when creating our own work, which definitely made me feel less crazy at times. At the same time there were also unexpected insights into how they approached smaller details, such as colour theory and how it's applied to zones in *Sonic*.

As *Sonic* celebrates its 35th anniversary, where would you like to see the series go next?

I'm definitely excited to see some new stuff. *Shadow Generations* showed that other characters can be just as good as Sonic, capitalising on their unique abilities if it still meshes with a core '*Sonic*-y' feel. I think the audience is a bit played out on 'anniversary' games, but if there was to be another, I think it'd be fun if classic Sonic and modern Sonic's roles were reversed, with 3D gameplay for classic and 2D for modern.

» [Wii] Sonic, Mario and their friends compete in a series of events and challenges.

» [Wii] Who will win the freestyle? Our money is on Tails thanks to his rear propeller.

UNLIKELIEST CROSSOVER

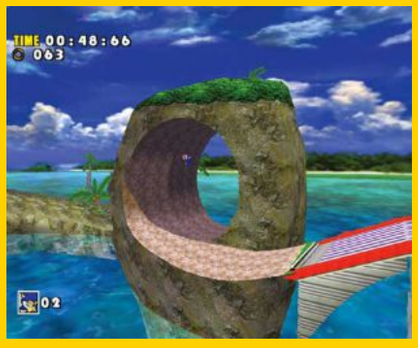
MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

WII, 2007

There was a time when it would seem not just unlikely, but unfeasible and downright unnatural for Sonic and Mario to feature together in the same videogame. That stance softened when Sega exited the hardware business and started releasing *Sonic* games for the Nintendo GameCube and Game Boy Advance. And then it finally happened in 2007, when the two rival platform mascots (and their entourages) finally went head-to-head in an event-based sports game based on the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics.

The game was developed for the Wii and DS by Sega, and played on the rivalry in the game's cover art, depicting Mario and Sonic on the sprint track, heads down, racing each other. Let's be honest – there was only going to be one winner, wasn't there? Yeah, us! The success of this unlikely crossover has resulted in its own long-running series, with games based on the London 2012, Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. Two spin-off games based on the Vancouver 2010 and Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics have also been released. The series is currently on hiatus, with no game released to tie in with the Paris 2024 Olympics, but hopefully the epic rivalry will recommence in the future.

» [Dreamcast] *Sonic Adventure* is an excellent 3D escapade that would benefit from the full remake treatment.



PLEASE REMAKE THIS

SONIC ADVENTURE

DREAMCAST, 1998

Sega has not been shy when it comes to remaking *Sonic* games. You could argue that every new release is an update of some previous game or other. But in *Sonic Adventure*, the first fully 3D *Sonic* platformer, we have a release that's crying out for a remake. The game was developed on a tight schedule, to launch alongside the Dreamcast, and it shows. It's rather rough around the edges, with the wonky 3D camera and iffy collision detection leading to an uneven playing experience. In addition, the game is quite short, despite the fact that it features six playable characters, each with their own campaign. All this is a shame, because *Sonic Adventure* brings some bold ideas to the table, especially when it comes to the transition to 3D. Rather than just serving up different courses to race around, the game introduces expansive areas that encourage players to slow down and explore.

Sonic Adventure has been updated twice in the past, first for the GameCube and PC in 2003 (*Sonic Adventure DX*), followed by a HD update for the Xbox 360, PS3 and PC in 2010. Neither meaningfully improved on the original, so c'mon Sega, we're still holding out for that remake.

» [Saturn] Seems kind of unfair that Amy Rose gets to razz around in a *car*."

BEST SOUNDTRACK

SONIC R

SATURN, 1997

Our final award is easily the most contested. While *Sonic* games vary wildly in quality, the soundtracks are far more reliable, with most games having a standout track or two. Vying for this award are *Sonic 3 & Knuckles*, *Sonic Adventure 2*, *Sonic Heroes* and *Sonic Unleashed*. And let's not forget *Sonic Generations*, although that's more like a greatest hits package. More recently, *Sonic Mania* deserves plaudits for returning to the roots of the classic Sonic sound.

Sonic R wins our award because it's just so catchy and unapologetically optimistic throughout. Composed by Richard Jacques, who previously scored *Sonic 3D: Flickies' Island*, the up-tempo dance-pop soundtrack features vocals by Teresa Jane Davis. *Sonic CD*'s opening and ending themes had vocals too, but in *Sonic R* nearly every stage has a proper verse and chorus song with full vocals. The complete soundtrack is so good that it's difficult to choose the highlights but if we must then *Super Sonic Racing*, *Can You Feel The Sunshine?*, *Living In The City* and *Work It Out* are surely up there with the best *Sonic* earworms ever recorded. Iconic is an overused word but it really does apply to the *Sonic R* soundtrack. ✱

» [Saturn] The *Sonic R* soundtrack polarised players on release, but there's no denying it fits the racing theme perfectly.

SCORING SONIC

COMPOSER RICHARD JACQUES REVEALS THE STORIES BEHIND THE MUSIC

What was it like to be part of the *Sonic* series at the height of its popularity? Were you nervous at all?

It was an incredible honour to be tasked with composing a *Sonic* soundtrack. I remember feeling the weight of the franchise and its popularity, so I felt a little pressure for sure, but not really nervous. During my studies at music college, which was only a year or two before composing *Sonic 3D* for the Saturn, I bought a Mega Drive so I'd been playing Sonic games and felt well prepared. I was also playing a lot of *Sonic CD* around this time – the Japanese version – which is probably still my favourite *Sonic* soundtrack. So going in to compose *Sonic 3D* was a combination of excitement and pressure.

Where did the idea to feature female vocals on *Sonic R* come from?

This idea came from Yuji Naka. Around this time, there were many female J-pop artists that were at the height of their fame, such as Namie Amuro. We did a test with one song, *Super Sonic Racing*, where I recorded a demo version with a singer friend and sent it to Naka-san. He then confirmed that he wanted vocals throughout the game on every track, so the rest, as they say, is history.

***Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* features music from various Sega games. Do you enjoy reimagining existing compositions?**

Well since I'm a fan of so much of the music in *Transformed* it was a joy to work on. I remember the day I downloaded a huge file of all of the masters and multitracks from the original music. It was like a treasure trove of Sega music goodness! It was a great opportunity to go through all of these amazing compositions and reimagine them for the game, and actually it was quite challenging at times to make all the tracks gel together in a cohesive way. But I know many people who have the whole soundtrack in their playlists so I think it worked out.

Which of your own *Sonic* soundtracks is your personal favourite?

I think musically there are some nice ideas in *Sonic 3D*. It would be nice to revisit some of those one day. But overall I'd probably say *Sonic R*. It is very humbling to think that after 65 million streams and counting, new fans are discovering the soundtrack who weren't even born when I wrote it!

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ULTIMATE GUIDE

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
- **DEVELOPER:** SEGA TECHNICAL INSTITUTE
- **PLATFORM:** SEGA MEGA DRIVE
- **RELEASED:** SONIC 2SDAY (24 NOVEMBER 1992)
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

THERE ARE VIDEOGAMES THAT AGE GRACEFULLY. AND THEN THERE'S SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2, WHICH STUBBORNLY REFUSES TO AGE. INSTEAD, IT SIMPLY RACES PAST TIME SO QUICKLY THAT TIME JUST CAN'T CATCH UP WITH IT

WORDS BY PAUL KAUTZ

When Sega released the sequel to Sonic's first adventure in 1992, expectations were sky-high. The first game had quickly established the speedy hedgehog as the Mega Drive's mascot and finally given Sega a hero capable of competing with a certain Italian plumber. But rather than resting on its laurels, Sega put the pedal to the metal for the sequel. The result was a game that was bigger, faster and more spectacular in every way – and is still regarded today as one of the highlights of the 16-bit era.

From the first second, you feel right at home: the Emerald Hill Zone welcomes you with lush greenery, a sky in brilliant Sega blue and music that stubbornly refuses to leave your ear. Sonic rolls over hills, races through loops and collects golden rings like other people collect stamps. Of course, this dream of perfect flow usually comes to a screeching halt after just a few seconds. Because there's always an enemy lurking somewhere, a spike shooting up from the ground, or a yawning chasm waiting. This serves as a harsh reminder to the overconfident player that, whilst the thrill of speed looks fantastic, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is still a platformer, not a racing game. But that is precisely where its strength lies, a strength that remains so special to this day. The game constantly conveys the feeling of being incredibly fast, without ever becoming completely chaotic. Those who know the levels just zip right through them. Those who don't, learn in an amusing way that going full throttle all the time usually ends in a rapid loss of rings and, ultimately, lives.

One of the biggest innovations is Sonic's new companion, Miles 'Tails' Prower: a two-tailed fox whose name remains one of the most charming puns in the history of videogames (just in case: 'Prower' = 'per hour' as in 'miles per hour'). Tails is a very likeable sidekick: he co-collects rings, attacks enemies and, thanks to his invulnerability, cheerfully returns to Sonic after every mishap as if nothing had happened. And he prefers to do so by flying, as his two tails essentially turn him into a furry little helicopter, allowing him to hover briefly.

» [Mega Drive] Sonic and Tails – what a cool team!

» [Mega Drive] The Spin Dash, which can be charged at any time, is new to the game and an incredibly useful manoeuvre.

ZONED OUT

SONIC 2'S BEST ZONES

EMERALD HILL ZONE

■ Emerald Hill Zone is the first world in *Sonic 2*, and just as iconic as the Green Hill Zone from the first game. Here you'll find palm trees with coconut-throwing monkeys, angry bees, snarling piranhas, sparkling waterfalls, fast loops, cool corkscrews and a sky full of wonderful Sega blue. The perfect start to the game.

CHEMICAL PLANT ZONE

■ The second world, Chemical Plant Zone, really puts Sonic and Tails through their paces with its endlessly long and often winding straights, demonstrating just how mind-blowingly fast the game can get. What's more, our heroes are frequently propelled automatically through long tubes at top speed.

CASINO NIGHT ZONE

■ The fourth world is a glittering and sparkling trip to virtual Las Vegas, where Sonic's ability to transform into a ball is exploited to the fullest – because here, the hedgehog is jumping from one pinball machine to the next. Casino Night Zone is where the foundations for *Sonic Spinball* (1993) were laid.

METROPOLIS ZONE

■ The eighth world is the only one in the entire game that consists not of two, but of three acts. And in these, the players' skill is put to an extremely tough test. Here await some of the trickiest jumping sections and the most maliciously placed enemies in the whole game.

SKY CHASE ZONE

■ Shortly before the end of the game, Sonic jumps onto Tails' Tornado biplane to battle enemies in mid-air, accompanied by wonderfully relaxed music. But this sense of relief is deceptive, as this level leads straight into the extremely challenging Wing Fortress Zone and the grand finale in the Death Egg Zone.

SPECIAL STAGES

■ If you have at least 50 golden rings when passing a checkpoint, you'll be invited to the Special Stage: fast-paced 3D tubes in which you must collect specific numbers of rings to receive one of the Chaos Emeralds as a reward at the end. If you have all seven, you can transform into Super Sonic!

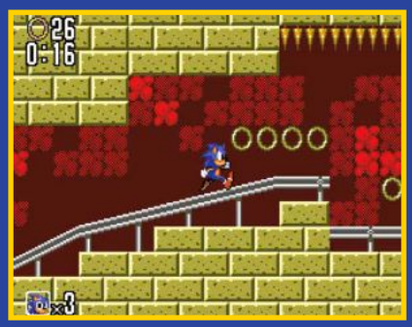
Of course, the pair's mission is to once again stop the megalomaniac Dr Ivo Robotnik (also known as Eggman), who not only transforms the little creatures of the Sonicverse into nasty machines, but is also increasingly destroying the world itself. At the end of each zone, Sonic and Tails not only make him pay dearly for this (more on this in the Boss Rush panel), but also, after successfully whacking Robotnik, free the captive animals in the level, thereby gradually making the world a better place to live in again.

This world consists of 11 Zones, divided into 20 Acts that could hardly be more different: the introductory Emerald Hill Zone, for example, feels like a classic *Sonic* stage with its loops, long corkscrew lanes and cheerful palm trees. The Chemical Plant Zone, on the other hand, transforms industrial facilities into a fast-paced obstacle course full of pipes and toxic chemicals. The Casino Night Zone impressively demonstrates that pinball machines and platformers mesh together surprisingly well. The Hill Top Zone introduces lava into the mix, while the Oil Ocean Zone proves that environmental pollution can give rise to surprisingly challenging platforming sections. The Sky Chase Zone treats players to a brief breather from the wings of a biplane, before the Wing Fortress Zone becomes quite serious once more.

And then, of course, there are the Special Stages: if Sonic has 50 golden rings in his pocket whilst passing one of the glowing red checkpoints, a glittering portal opens to the Special Stage. Here, Sonic and Tails race down wildly winding 3D tubes, with the ultimate goal of bagging one of the seven Chaos Emeralds waiting at the end of each of these levels. Much easier said than done, though, because to obtain these precious gems, the pair must collect a certain number of rings in each section of the Special Stage. For one thing, they're not that easy to come by. And for another, the levels are also littered with tons of bombs that snatch the dream of owning the hard-earned gems right back from the heroes.

If you manage the feat of bagging all seven Chaos Emeralds, Sonic can then transform into Super Sonic (provided he has collected at least 50 rings). Glowing yellow and accompanied by fast-paced music, he is then invulnerable, which takes the fear out of lava lakes, for example, and makes boss battles a breeze. However, he's also much faster, which tends to make the higher levels with their many ways to plummet to your doom significantly more difficult. But he looks so cool! And the transformation into Super Sonic is so wonderfully dramatic!

Generally speaking, even 34 years on, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is still a remarkably attractive game. The levels are colourful and very easy to navigate; friends and foes are designed with great attention to detail and smooth animations, whilst numerous objects whizz



» [Master System] On the 8-Bit systems, Sonic is on his own – Tails has been kidnapped by Robotnik and needs to be rescued.

WHERE'S TAILS?

HOW SONIC TOOK THE 8-BIT ROUTE

Sonic The Hedgehog, released on the Master System and Game Gear in late-1991, was a very special game. For one thing, it wasn't developed directly by Sega, but by Ancient, the acclaimed company run by the Koshiro family. And secondly, despite the platforms' modest 8-bit origins, this game delivered a truly impressive performance; rather than simply attempting to replicate its big 16-bit predecessor on the smaller system, it stood on its own as a standalone (and remarkably good) game.

So the sequel had big shoes to fill. In that respect, it's hardly surprising that the new development team, Aspect, played it safe and followed the approach of the first instalment. In *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, the game is, for the most part, very different from the Mega Drive version, featuring a new storyline, new levels, new bosses, a new soundtrack and various new vehicles (such as a hang-glider) which Sonic can use to give his red shoes a short rest. Incidentally, this applies only to Sonic, as although Tails appears on the title and on all level start screens, he is kidnapped by Dr Robotnik right at the start of the intro and must be rescued.

The resulting game was still good, but no longer as surprising as its predecessor. The version for the Game Gear, released at the same time, was identical in content, but due to the significantly smaller playfield, it was much more difficult than the Master System version.

» [Mega Drive] If you've collected all seven Chaos Emeralds, you can transform into Super Sonic. He looks cool, is lightning-fast and invincible, but also difficult to control.

» [Mega Drive] Some levels can also be played together on split-screen. However, due to technical limitations, this mode suffers from severe interlace flickering.

SONIC'S SIDEKICKS

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE FROGGY

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

Just like Knuckles, Shadow (also known as The Ultimate Life Form) actually started out as one of Sonic's enemies, but soon joined forces with him, even though the two still share a healthy rivalry. Shadow is an excellent fighter who can hold his own against Sonic in almost every respect.

AMY ROSE

Amy isn't just Sonic's biggest fan, she's also a very capable fighter – there's a reason her Piko Piko Hammer is almost as big as she is, and she wields it with impressive skill. She might be a bit of a nuisance at times, but she's a valuable member of Sonic's team.

BLAZE THE CAT

Blaze is neither an energised sidekick nor a growling former adversary, but an imperial princess from another dimension who usually remains calm and collected at all times. And yet she is an excellent fighter in her own right, who need not hide behind Sonic in any respect.

MILES 'TAILS' PROWER

The fox Miles 'Tails' Prower (not 'Power'!) makes his debut in *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* and goes on to become Sonic's most important companion and friend in subsequent games. He can use his twin tails like helicopter rotors to keep up with Sonic.

BIG THE CAT

Big may not be the brightest, but he's a loyal friend, a laid-back, cheerful character, a formidable fighter when he needs to be – and a passionate angler who loves nothing more than to quietly unpack his rod and go fishing with his friend Froggy.

KNUCKLES THE ECHIDNA

Knuckles made his first appearance in *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* (1994). Although he was originally an enemy in that game, he quickly became an important (albeit somewhat grumpy) partner to Sonic. He is very strong, can glide through the air and climb walls.

BOSS RUSH

DR ROBOTNIK'S FLEET OF MADNESS

1 EGG DRILLSTER

■ The Egg Drillster is the first boss you encounter in the game. As such, it doesn't pose much of a challenge.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: To knock Dr Robotnik out of his buggy, he simply needs to be hit eight times by Sonic's spin attack. Just be careful not to land on the dangerous drill at the front!

2 EGG POISON

■ The Egg Poison awaits at the end of the Chemical Plant Zone. It has a pump with which it sprays the deadly Mega Mack fluid.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: Here, too, eight Sonic spins are enough to make the machine explode. Keep an eye on the yellow platform you're standing on, as parts of it regularly fold away.

3 EGG HAMMER

■ At the end of the Aquatic Ruin Zone, Dr Robotnik brings out the big hammer. But not to flatten Sonic, rather to fire arrows at him.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: You can jump onto these arrows (which get briefly stuck in the totem poles on the left and right) to attack Robotnik's vehicle eight times.

5 EGG SCORCHER MARK 11

■ Sonic doesn't get to see this vehicle very often, as Dr Robotnik only briefly emerges from the protective lava in it.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: In these brief moments, you must hit it as often as possible, because afterwards Robotnik will unleash his flamethrower. Also, be careful not to fall into the lava!

6 EGG DIGGER

■ Unlike the Egg Drillster mentioned before, the Egg Digger has two huge drills with which it burrows through the arena.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: Dodge the rocks that Robotnik dislodges from the ceiling whilst drilling. When he charges at Sonic with the Egg Digger, eight hits to the cockpit are enough to get rid of him.

8 EGG BOUNCER

■ The Egg Bouncer is a flying machine that's not easy to attack, as it defends itself with seven rotating spheres.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: If you attack the vehicle, one of the spheres breaks away to come for you. Once you've got rid of them all, Dr Robotnik also unleashes a powerful laser.

9 LASER PRISON

■ Here, the bad doctor doesn't attack you himself, but instead lets a powerful laser do the dirty work for him.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: The laser at the top of the screen is only vulnerable when it opens up and charges. Jump up to it by using the floating platforms, attack and run away quickly!

10 MECHA SONIC

■ This metal monster is Robotnik's attempt to replicate Sonic as a deadly weapon. He's very fast, full of tricks and extremely lethal.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: What makes the fight difficult is that Sonic has no protective rings here. Whenever Mecha Sonic is standing in a corner: jump on him! Otherwise, dodge, dodge, dodge!

4 EGG CLAW

Robotnik has really pulled out all the stops with the Egg Claw. In keeping with the Casino Night Zone, this vehicle sparkles and glitters magnificently!

HOW TO BEAT THEM: The Egg Claw must also be hit eight times to progress. However, this is only possible from above, as it is protected from below by an energy field.

7 EGGMARINE

The Eggmarine awaits at the end of the Oil Ocean Zone. Not only must you dodge its attacks, but you must also avoid falling into the oil!

HOW TO BEAT THEM: Attack Robotnik's vehicle repeatedly as soon as it appears. When it disappears, it will attack with either a three-shot laser or a flexible scorpion stinger.

11 DEATH EGG

This is the grand finale of *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, and the biggest boss challenge in the whole game.

HOW TO BEAT THEM: When you're in front of the Death Egg, Robotnik will attack you with his spiked arms. If you're behind him, he'll throw Robotnik-shaped mines at you. Dodge both, jump high and hit the fiend on top.

past simultaneously through the sections that scroll smoothly across multiple layers. The speed is at times insanely high, there's no stuttering and only very rarely a flickering sprite. And while the 3D levels aren't based on true polygonal calculations (which the Mega Drive CPU had tremendous difficulties with), but on very clever graphical tricks, they still look very slick and, at the time, at least drew some appreciatively raised eyebrows from the SNES camp.

And let us not forget *Sonic 2*'s legendary soundtrack penned by Masato Nakamura, which combines catchy melodies with pumping rhythms and fits the game's fast pace perfectly. Each zone has its very own musical identity: Emerald Hill Zone sounds like a summer holiday, Chemical Plant Zone like a futuristic factory, and Casino Night Zone like a Vegas casino where you'd actually like to stay far longer than would be good for you. The soundtrack consists of around two dozen tracks, some of which are very long and feature smart instrumentation. This is all the more remarkable when you consider that the game's cartridge offered just one measly megabyte of storage space.

But of course, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* isn't perfect. Some jumps require timing that just has to be learnt by heart. Every now and then, Sonic races at top speed straight into an enemy that nobody could possibly have spotted beforehand. In the Special Stages, Tails, laden with rings, often runs straight into bombs, frequently preventing you from grabbing the Chaos Emerald you thought was a sure thing. The camera also occasionally struggles to keep up. And yet it's precisely these little moments of frustration that are an important part of the nostalgic package.

Just like its predecessor, *Sonic 2* isn't a game where you simply race stubbornly from left to right. Of course, the game treats you to some exhilarating full-throttle moments every now and then. But it also regularly slows you down so you can set off in search of extra lives or rings. The game's developers have understood that movement is fun – not as an end in itself, but as a reward. Anyone familiar with the levels whizzes through loops, ramps and tubes, as if riding a perfectly choreographed roller-coaster. This also creates excellent replay value: on your first playthrough, you cautiously feel your way towards the finish line. By the tenth playthrough, however, you'll find yourself wondering how you ever managed to race into those spikes or fall into that abyss.

These are just a few of the many reasons why, even several decades on, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* still ranks among the best games of all time. It isn't just a fast-paced platformer featuring a hero with an attitude, the sort which were a dime a dozen in the early Nineties. It is a masterpiece of world design, with likeable characters, a brilliant soundtrack and a presentation that still feels astonishingly fresh today. A game that we'll still be smiling happily about in another 34 years' time. ✱

THE KNUCKLES CONNECTION

HOW KNUCKLES ENDED UP IN SONIC 2

Released in 1994, *Sonic & Knuckles* is an unusual cartridge. Instead of the end cap, it has a flap on the top, beneath which hides a cartridge slot. This 'lock-on' feature was actually intended to allow this game to be combined with *Sonic The Hedgehog 3*, creating an extra-long adventure with Knuckles as the hero.

However, you can also put in *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, in which case Knuckles takes on the roles of Sonic and Tails. The game's level design remains the same, but Knuckles' different moveset presents a number of new challenges. For example, he cannot jump as high as Sonic, which makes some sections more difficult.

Alex Kidd In Miracle World

MORE THAN A GAMING MASCOT

» MASTER SYSTEM » 1986 » SEGA R&D2

Alex Kidd's first Master System game means a lot to me, and it's not just down to it being a brilliant slice of Eighties platforming. It was an immensely well-known game in Master System circles, due to it being included as a pack-in title, but this also meant it would go on to become quite expensive, as so many didn't require a physical copy of it.

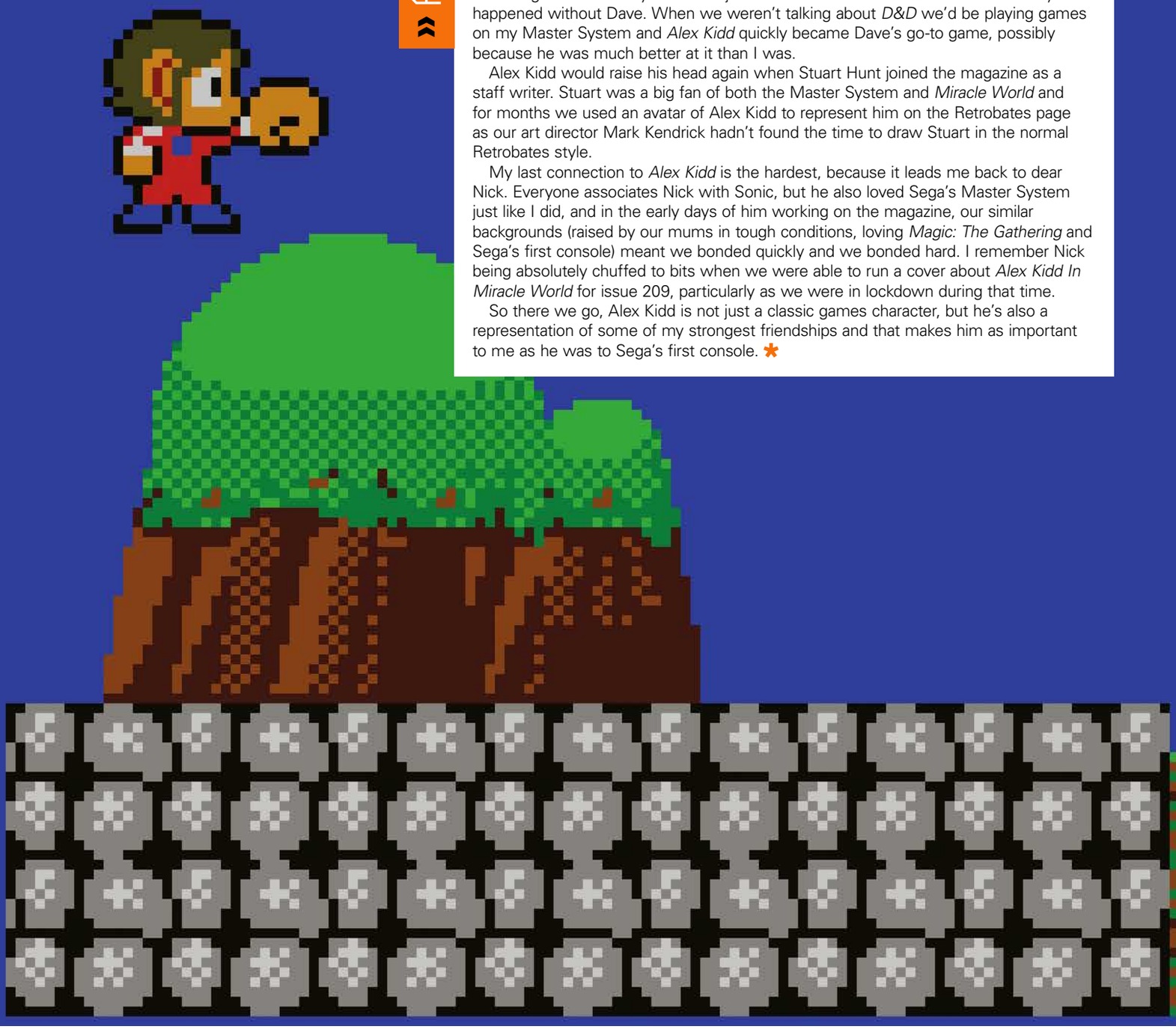
When I think about *Alex Kidd* today, I don't necessarily think about the game itself, but three core relationships that had a huge impact on me at various stages of my life. The first of these was in the early Nineties with a friend called Dave Jenkins (not his name by the way). Dave was one of the first people who introduced me to *Dungeons & Dragons*. We'd typically play most Saturday nights and Dave and I would travel to Boscombe on the bus to visit a small independent comic shop called Wonderworld that stocked *D&D* books (they were a lot rarer in the Nineties compared to today).

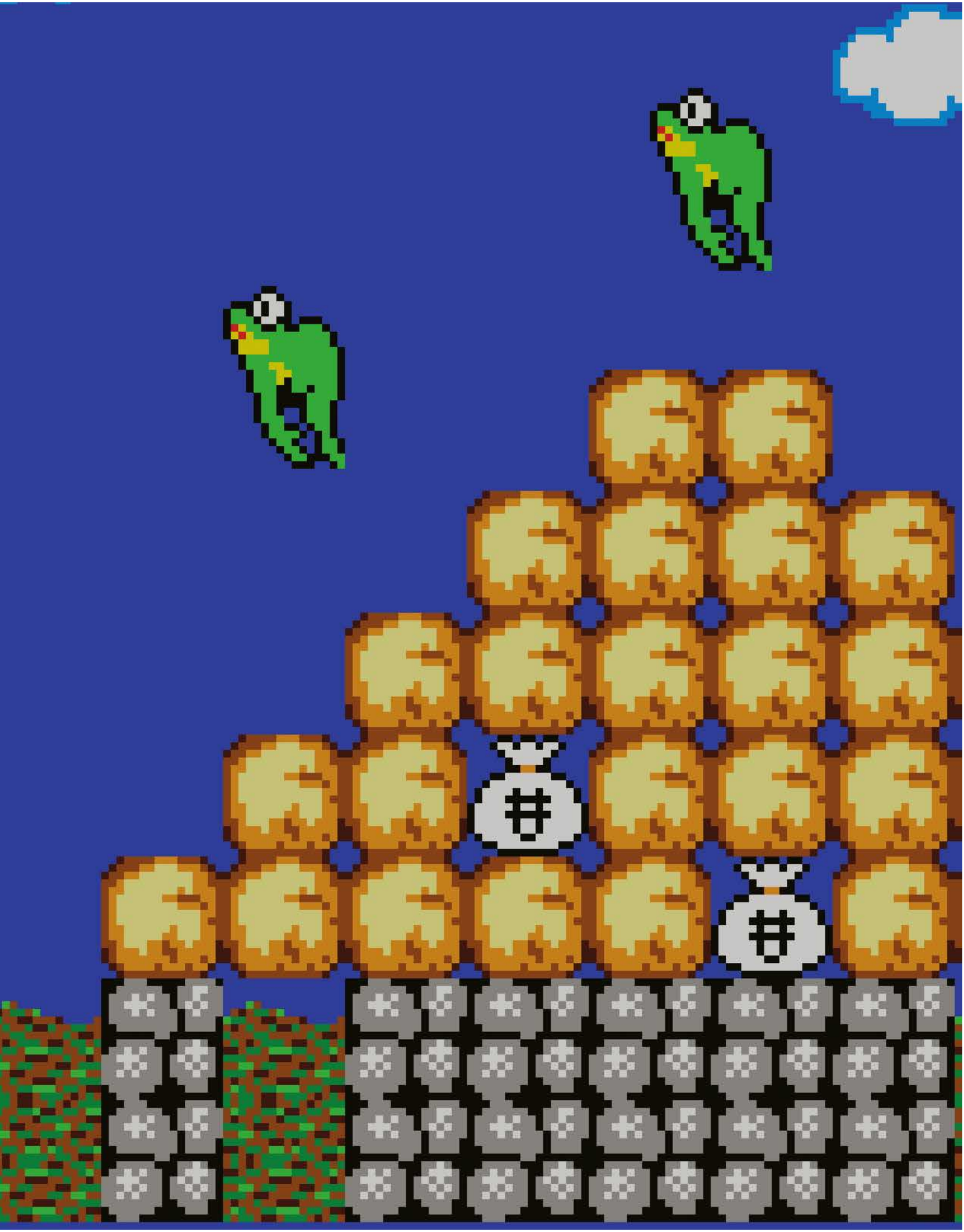
I loved *D&D* and it led to me running my own games, which reignited my love of writing and effectively led to the job I have now. None of that would have likely happened without Dave. When we weren't talking about *D&D* we'd be playing games on my Master System and *Alex Kidd* quickly became Dave's go-to game, possibly because he was much better at it than I was.

Alex Kidd would raise his head again when Stuart Hunt joined the magazine as a staff writer. Stuart was a big fan of both the Master System and *Miracle World* and for months we used an avatar of Alex Kidd to represent him on the Retrobates page as our art director Mark Kendrick hadn't found the time to draw Stuart in the normal Retrobates style.

My last connection to *Alex Kidd* is the hardest, because it leads me back to dear Nick. Everyone associates Nick with Sonic, but he also loved Sega's Master System just like I did, and in the early days of him working on the magazine, our similar backgrounds (raised by our mums in tough conditions, loving *Magic: The Gathering* and Sega's first console) meant we bonded quickly and we bonded hard. I remember Nick being absolutely chuffed to bits when we were able to run a cover about *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* for issue 209, particularly as we were in lockdown during that time.

So there we go, Alex Kidd is not just a classic games character, but he's also a representation of some of my strongest friendships and that makes him as important to me as he was to Sega's first console. ✱





THE MAKING OF Roller Coaster

ROLL UP, ROLL UP, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! TAKE YOUR SEATS AND HEAR THE HITHERTO UNTOLD STORY BEHIND ROLLER COASTER, ONE THE MOST INGENIOUS PLATFORMERS TO EVER GRACE THE ZX SPECTRUM. IT'S A HAIR-RAISING TALE OF HIGH AND LOWS AND TWISTS AND TURNS. ROLL UP, ROLL UP!

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** ELITE SYSTEMS
- **DEVELOPER:** S BROCKLEHURST
- **PLATFORM:** ZX SPECTRUM
- **RELEASED:** 1986
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

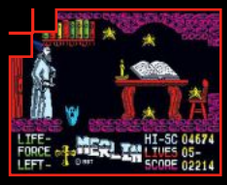
The programming career of S Brocklehurst didn't begin like a traditional roller-coaster. There was no steady uphill climb, where he grasped the basics and learnt through repeated mistakes, before finally reaching a level of aptitude and whooshing towards success. It was more like a modern launch coaster – he went from 0 to 60mph in no time at all. "I started from nothing," he says. "It was a massive learning curve, but a fast one."

Before getting on this wild ride he had already achieved success in a different industry. "I was working in engineering, in oil refineries. I grew up hearing about all the money they were making in that business, and that was my aim, to make money. And I did end up earning a lot of money in the oil game. Then along came computers."

He was in his 20s at the time and the lure of making even more money in the burgeoning computer game business was appealing. Stories of programming whiz-kids driving around in Porches were often in the press, and he happened to have the right tools for the job. "Computers just worked for me," he tells us. "As a teenager I was top of the whole school for maths and stuff like that. So obviously that was my bent. I suppose you could call it an addiction or something. Then someone handed me a 48K Spectrum and I got completely hooked on it. I was spending 24 hours a day on it. I was often surprised when sunlight started to peak through the curtains and I realised I'd been on the Spectrum all night. At the time I'd bought a new house with my wife and I was halfway through doing it up, and all that was put on hold. The gable end was half painted for a long time."

With the decorating materials gathering dust, his full focus was on the Spectrum and its idiosyncrasies. "I started with BASIC, and quickly realised that you couldn't really use that for anything as it was too slow, so I learnt machine code," he says, casually, making the leap that would trip up many wannabe programmers. "I put it down to tenacity. Machine code didn't phase me for one second. It was the challenge as well. I

» [ZX Spectrum] Enter the Fun House. It's a real crazy show where anything can go.



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ANIMATOR 1
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM
RELEASED: 1986

TARANTULA
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM
RELEASED: 1987

MERLIN (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM
RELEASED: 1988

» [ZX Spectrum] All the fun of the fair. The park contains 60 screens filled with thrills, spills and chills.

was addicted to the challenge, of breaking barriers each day. The starting point was getting machine code going and placing a single dot on the screen, then creating an image with dots. I discovered that the display on the Spectrum was a bit screwy. You had to stick to the rules, but you could have an image, like all the stalls and scenery, and then overlay them with different colours. My wife would come in and look over my shoulder and say, 'Why is the grass blue?'"

Making the best possible use of the Spectrum's vivid colour palette was key to *Roller Coaster*, a game set in an amusement park. All of the traditional rides were present – the dodgems, the big wheel, the waltzer, and of course the eponymous roller-coaster – but this funfair was directly inspired by a popular UK park in the North West, not too far from his Cheshire home. "*Roller Coaster* was based mainly on the Pleasure Beach at Blackpool," he reveals. "You had all these rides and all these goodies, and I just thought it would be cool to put all of that into a game. To have an amusement park all to yourself, to explore, and have a go on working rides. Not just jumping from platform to platform, but actually being able to ride on something."

At first glance the game looked like a typical flick-screen Spectrum platformer, like *Jet Set Willy* or *Technician Ted*, but what set it apart was the actual rides. These intricate creations often covered multiple screens and each one was like a minigame, where you rode it back and forth, trying to collect the money bags that were often just out of reach. "The next step was working out the mechanics of it: how much memory I had available, and how fast the processor was. I kept going back, trying to find faster ways of doing things. With *Roller Coaster* there were a lot of graphics on the screen, and I realised that I couldn't have the player seeing

» [ZX Spectrum] If a moving object doesn't kill you then there's a good chance you can ride on it.

» [ZX Spectrum] It wouldn't be an amusement park without the promise of severe whiplash from riding the dodgems.

» [ZX Spectrum] Déjà vu. *Dragon's Lair* on the Game Boy (below) was a straight-up re-skin of *Roller Coaster*.

A LEGEND REBORN

WHEN DIRK THE DARING BRAVED THE DODGEMS

In the history of curious conversions, the Nintendo Game Boy version of *Roller Coaster* surely stands above everything else. In the early Nineties, Elite Systems leaned on its *Dragon's Lair* licence and produced a series of adaptations for Nintendo consoles. The NES and SNES games were original platform games, while the Game Boy version was an audacious re-skin of *Roller Coaster*. Titled *Dragon's Lair: The Legend* and released in 1991, the game took series hero Dirk The Daring and dropped him into a strange medieaval amusement park. There was some justification for this – the *Dragon's Lair* laserdisc game did feature a number of fairground-style segments, notably the barrel ride through 'raging waters' – but it was still quite a reach from Elite.

Was the creator of *Roller Coaster* aware that his game has been adapted in this manner? "I didn't find out until years later, when I Googled myself," he says. "There is some confusion here as I had a three years licence with Elite for *Roller Coaster*, it wasn't in perpetuity. But I never got any money for that Nintendo game. Like I said, I didn't even know about it until recently." It's another twist in the tale of *Roller Coaster*.

PARKS AND INSPIRATION

THE REAL BLACKPOOL PLEASURE BEACH RIDES FEATURED IN THE GAME

ROLLER COASTER

■ This classic wooden coaster opened at the Pleasure Beach in 1933. It's 700 metres long and features multiple camelback hills. In 2010 it was painted orange and renamed Nickelodeon Streak. In the game the coaster is one of the largest rides, spanning eight separate screens.

LOG FLUME

■ This wet ride arrived at Blackpool in 1967, making it Europe's first-ever flume. In the early 2000s it was refurbished and renamed Drench Falls, before closing permanently in 2006. This is the most prominent ride in the game, located to the right of the start screen.

GOLD MINE

■ Opening in 1971, this dark ride transported riders through a series of underground tunnels, where animatronic miners worked. In 2013 it was re-themed to tie in with the *Wallace & Gromit* series. It is the longest ride in the game, covering nine screens in total.

RIVER CAVES

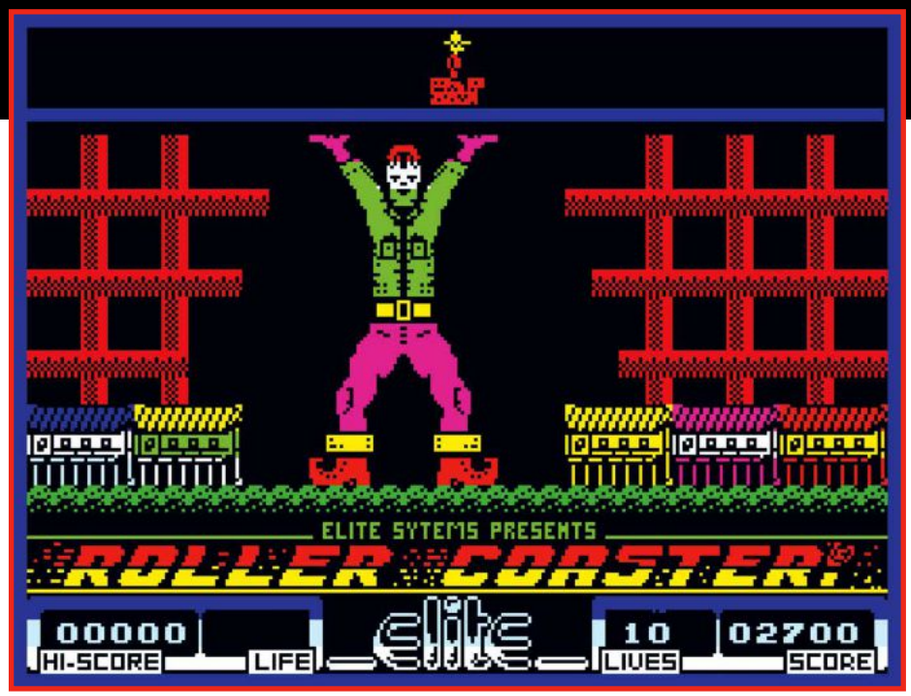
■ The original version of this boat ride dates back to 1905. Amazingly it was in constant operation until 2024, when it closed for refurbishment. The ride itself was rather gentle, but the version in the game is far livelier with many more climbs, drops and waterfalls.

GHOST TRAIN

■ The famous Blackpool Ghost Train originally opened in 1930 and has been updated and extended multiple times over the years. As of 2026 it's still in operation. The version in the game occupies a single screen and features bats, skulls and disembodied arms.

FLYING CARPET

■ This flat ride only operated briefly at the Pleasure Beach, between 1982 and 1984 – but time enough for the *Roller Coaster* creator to witness it and include it in his game. It appears near to the Ghost Train, on one screen, and features the largest moving sprite in the game.

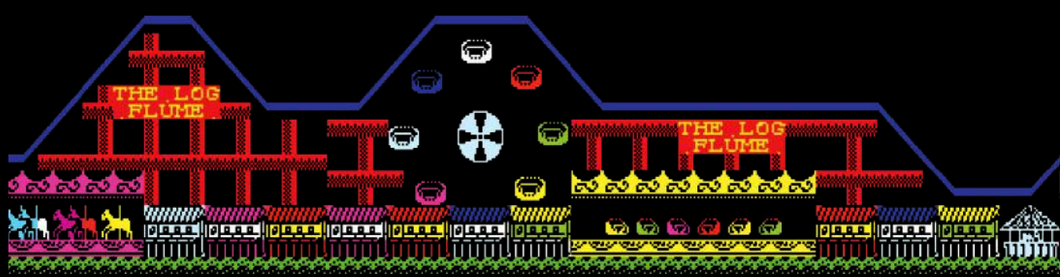


» [ZX Spectrum] The famous Gulliver statue from Blackpool Pleasure Beach is recreated in the game.

▶ everything being built on-screen – it had to appear almost instantly. I spent two months trying to gain more memory. Two solid months just finding ways of shrinking what I'd already done without losing anything."

Roller Coaster was a big game, featuring 60 busy screens in total, but the original plan was to include even more. "There should have been 64!" he says, annoyed with himself even after all this time. "But I ran out of memory. I'm still kicking myself about those four missing screens. Why so many? I dunno really. I just wanted to do the Pleasure Beach justice and include all of the different rides. And *Jet Set Willy* had 60 screens, so I knew I had to at least match that. Long after I finished the game I realised I probably should have programmed it dynamically. Each screen was stored in one static 256 byte block, but by reusing graphics and skipping things I could have shrunk it down and included even more screens." He mentions *Jet Set Willy* there, and unsurprisingly that game and its predecessor *Manic Miner* heavily influenced *Roller Coaster*. "Oh yeah, they were obvious inspirations at the time. But then *Manic Miner* itself was inspired by *Miner 2049er*, wasn't it?"

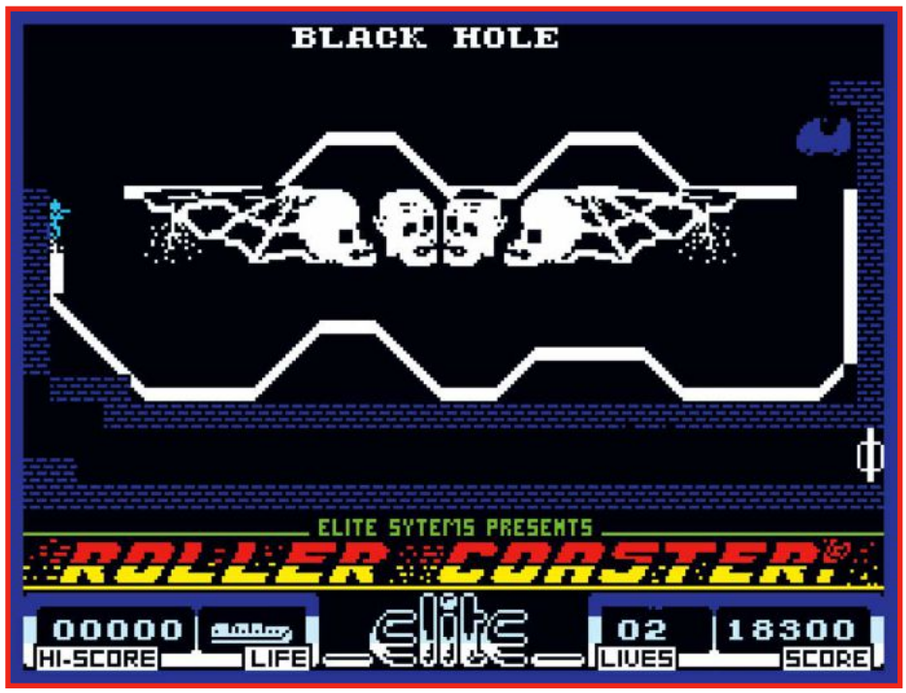
In mid-1985, around a year after he first picked up a Spectrum, *Roller Coaster* was finished and ready for release. It was a sole undertaking – he coded the game, drew all the graphics and produced the sound effects, with just a little help from his mother to create the music that plays on the title screen. The next step was to find a suitable publisher. "I'd finished the game and error checked it. I took it along to a few publishers, but Elite Systems stood out to me due to its advertising spend and the licences it was buying like *Commando* and *Scooby Doo*. Elite was doing the more professional thing, or so it seemed to me at the time anyway." Elite was indeed focussed on coin-op and TV licences at this point, but it saw the potential in *Roller Coaster* and signed up the game. It also requested some changes. "Elite didn't like the loading screen I'd done, so it had an artist provide a new one. Some of the graphics on the Gold Mine ride needed refining, because it was felt they looked a bit crude. I was also asked to make the main character bigger. The trouble was, all the algorithms relied on the character's size, and if I made it bigger, you'd be tripping



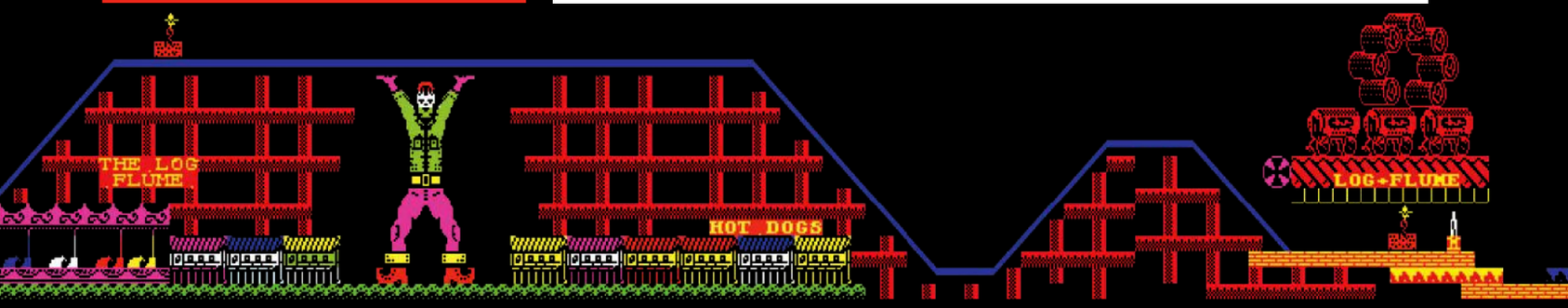
over roller-coasters and stuff. So it wasn't possible to increase its size, and in the end that was accepted by Elite. As an aside, I remember Elite had some programmers working on that *Scooby Doo* game and it wasn't going at all well. And I don't think those guys liked me too much because I turned up at their office with *Roller Coaster* which was fully finished and ready to go."

Elite began to publish ads for the game in November 1985 ahead of its release at the beginning of 1986. The reviews that followed were extremely positive, with the press praising the amusement park setting and how well it was realised on the Spectrum. The key takeaway was that, yes, it was another platformer, but the addition of the functioning rides and the desire to explore the entire park set it apart from rival titles. "*Roller Coaster* is one of the most deserving titles yet to appear from Elite," commented *Crash*. "It's what a game should be, just totally unpretentious and fun to play." The mag awarded it 94% and the coveted Crash Smash award. Similarly, *Your Sinclair* gave it 9/10 and highlighted the game's arcade credentials. "Elite has made something of a speciality converting arcade games of late," it wrote. "Here they have an original that's worthy of a full-sized machine of its own." Elsewhere it received 4/5 from *Sinclair User*, and 8/10 from *CVG*, who commented on the game's longevity, "Ride the *Roller Coaster* just once and you won't want to get off for a long, long time."

The positive reviews didn't translate into strong sales. Elite's *Commando* conversion was released at the same time and fired straight to the top of the charts, while *Roller Coaster* failed to break into the top 30. For the game's creator, the financial rewards were not what he hoped for. "I did make money on the game and a lot of people



» [ZX Spectrum] Spook! If you touch the track inside the Black Hole it illuminates some creepy skulls.



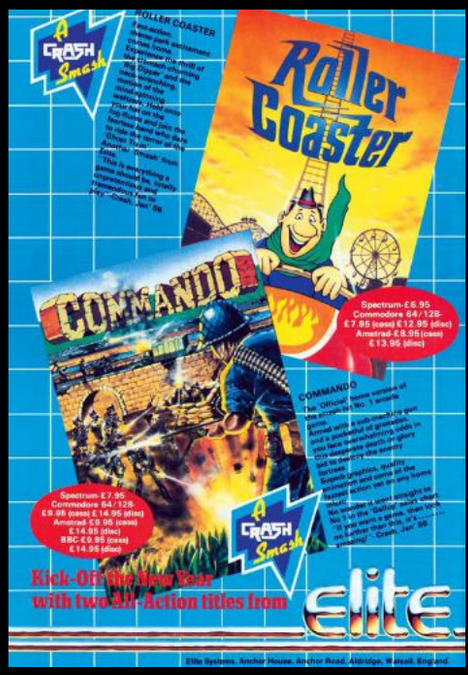
» [ZX Spectrum] The aim of the game is to gather up all of the money bags that have been scattered around the park.

were amazed at how much I made, but I was used to earning really good money in engineering. I got a big upfront payment but the royalties didn't follow. Personally I don't think Elite really pushed the game. It spent all the money pushing *Commando*. I didn't understand that. It had a product and it didn't push it. And the packaging looked generic. It looked too much like previous Elite releases. Looking at it on a shelf, from a retail point of view, to me it didn't stand out. But to be honest I was already well into my next project by this point."

» [ZX Spectrum] As in any amusement park, the rides are the main attraction. It helps when there are no two-hour queues…

That next project stemmed from *Roller Coaster* but it wasn't another game. Rather, it was a front end for his sprite and animation routines that was self-published as Animator 1. Several more games followed, including *Merlin* published by Firebird and *Tarantula* published by Creative Sparks, before he decided to quit the industry rather than moving up to the 16-bit systems. His next career change saw him creating video displays for use in nightclubs. Meanwhile, *Roller Coaster* rolled on. Elite rereleased it as a budget title in 1989 (when *Crash* magazine Smashed it a second time), and it was later included on a *Sinclair User* covertape. In 1991 the game also made a surprise appearance on the Game Boy (see A Legend Reborn panel).

"I suppose *Roller Coaster* was a good debut game," he says, reflecting. "But I also had a lot of worries. I'd walked away from engineering, and you know, had a mortgage and things like



» *Roller Coaster* was advertised alongside Elite's *Commando* conversion at the beginning of 1986.

» [ZX Spectrum] Your health is represented by a gravestone that slowly materialises each time you take damage. Your number's nearly up here.

that to worry about. So it was quite a big move for me. But it was also a fantastic move, when you think about where computers have gone now." His main regret is the stuff he didn't manage to implement. "I wish I'd included a cheat mode. I had control over the game and could access all of the areas of the park and ride the different rides. The code was there and I should have left it in, to give players another way to experience the game. I should have also made it an option so you could have 100 lives or something, instead of ten."

While the game is challenging, he reveals that he invited friends to playtest it during the development and provide feedback, which caused unexpected issues. "I ended up with a lot of people hanging around my house which I didn't like at all. It wasn't like I was a pop star or anything. There was a hush-hush aspect to it as well, to keep others from seeing what I was working on. During this time I know someone leaked a copy of the game to the guys at Ocean Software, and they tried to copy what I was doing, but gave up in the end."

This admission pre-empts the final twist in this tale – the name S Brocklehurst, the game's sole credit. "That was actually my wife's name," he reveals, succinctly explaining why it has taken us more than 20 years to track him down for an interview. "Lots of people write under pen names for various reasons. I didn't want to lose my anonymity. I didn't want people hanging around when I was trying to program. I mean, you can attract all sorts can't you? You can get journalists ringing you up…"

That seems like the perfect cue to draw our conversation to a close – but not before a poignant final note. He tells us that he sadly lost his wife a few years back, during the COVID pandemic. "That *Roller Coaster* pen name has become so important to me since she passed," he says. "It feels like I've left something behind for her, forever." ✱

» [ZX Spectrum] The game's main roller-coaster is a thrilling ride, spanning several screens across the top of the park.

PLATFORMING PERFECTION

KEY TITLES FROM THE GOLDEN ERA OF CLASSIC SPECTRUM PLATFORMERS

MANIC MINER (1983)

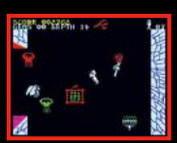
■ The quintessential Speccy platformer, featuring 20 devious caverns for Miner Willy to explore and pillage. It was converted to just about every other 8-bit system under the sun and was followed by a sequel, the bigger and arguably even better *Jet Set Willy*.

CHUCKIE EGG (1983)

■ The Spectrum version arrived alongside the BBC Micro and Dragon 32 versions and each release has its own merits. The key appeal of all three is that Hen-House Harry is light of his feet, allowing you to bound around levels, giving the game a fluid coin-op feel.

JUMPING JACK (1983)

■ Jumping Jack is quick and bold (so the opening rhyme goes) and our hero will need these attributes if he's to dodge the nasties and leap through the gaps to the top of each screen. A deceptively simple game that will enchant and enrage players in equal measure.



UNDERWURLDE (1984)

■ Sandwiched between *Sabre Wulf* and *Knight Lore* was *Underwurlde*, Ultimate's only out-and-out platformer. It can be an exercise in frustration, as Sabreman tumbles helplessly around the cavernous game map. But that old Ultimate magic is alive on every screen.

TECHNICIAN TED (1985)

■ Ted's adventures in the chip factory are legendary on the Spectrum – mainly because it's one of the most difficult games ever. Not only do you have to avoid the baddies but there are tasks to complete, often against the clock. It's a brutal yet brilliant platformer.

DYNAMITE DAN (1985)

■ This game pushed the boundaries of what players could expect from an 8-bit platformer. Featuring a huge colourful map, with a lift and raft to travel around it, it put the other games listed here in the shade. It was followed a year later by an even finer sequel.

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ALIEN BREED

DARK AND CLAUSTROPHOBIC, ALIEN BREED IS ONE OF THE BEST TOP-DOWN, RUN-AND-GUN SHOOTERS OF THE 16-BIT ERA. SETTING THE SCENE WAS THE ACCLAIMED BROODING TITLE MUSIC WRITTEN BY BRITISH COMPOSER ALLISTER BRIMBLE WITH ITS DEEP SYNTH LEADS AND INTENSE, DRIVING BEATS

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES

Allister Brimble continues to compose music and sound for videogames and he has more than 500 tunes to his name.

Teams17's top-down sci-fi shooter *Alien Breed* was an instant classic and there was no doubting its inspiration: James Cameron's masterpiece movie *Aliens* and the Atari arcade game *Gauntlet*. One or two players – assuming the roles of the only surviving space marines Johnson and Stone – would run around an alien-invaded space station shooting at whatever strange beasties happened to get in the way. They had to keep their wits about them or they'd end up like their on-screen colleagues.

Alien Breed was a slick, beautifully presented design masterclass with eye-pleasing graphical touches from flickering computer displays to horrifying aliens. It was also sonically superb. The game was peppered with machine gun fire, ambient industrial noises, environmental sounds and in-game speech but, before players got down to business, they were also treated to an amazingly atmospheric title track. Created by Allister Brimble and released in 1991, it proved to be one of his early career highlights.

Allister, born in 1970, had long displayed a talent for music. "When I was seven years old, my piano teacher asked me to compose a tune, which I managed to remember and score," he says. "I think this planted an early seed that would shape the rest of my career."

With the advent of home computers, Allister became fascinated by their audio capabilities and he started experimenting on a ZX Spectrum 48K using music composition software called Wham! The Music Box. Developed by Melbourne House in 1985, the beginner-friendly utility allowed users to write music with a bass line and treble, and it also featured drum effects. "I later copied Christmas carols into a ZX Spectrum 128K," Allister says. "My friends at school then challenged me to create versions of their favourite tunes for the Commodore 64, not thinking it was possible. I surprised them all by copying the music by ear, almost perfectly. When the Amiga was released I began transcribing music again, this time [electronic musician and composer] Jean-Michel Jarre's *Rendez-Vous*. I also attempted an original piece.

Later, Allister spotted an advert in *Micro Mart* magazine. A UK-based Amiga public domain (PD) library called 17-Bit Software was asking readers to send in their music, graphics and code for possible inclusion in its collection.

IN THE KNOW

- **DEVELOPER:** TEAM17
- **COMPOSER:** ALLISTER BRIMBLE
- **BEST TRACK:** TEAM17
- **RELEASE:** 1991
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA, VARIOUS
- **GENRE:** RUN-AND-GUN

» [Amiga] Kill an alien and you'll actually hear the sound sample of a newly born kitten with an added explosion.

» [Amiga] The Intex terminals sounded like typical computers with their associated beeps.

"Public domain was the only way we had to share our art back in those days," Allister says. "I sent in my *Rendez-Vous* track and the original piece and I was very surprised to get a letter back the next week saying they were very impressed and wanted to publish the work on their next news disk! Martyn Brown, the producer there, put me in contact with Grandslam Entertainment, and I had my first paid work for the game *Thunderbirds*. Soon after this, 17-Bit Software hooked up with a Swedish demo group called Team 7 to produce a new game called *Full Contact* for which I was asked to provide the title music. Then 17-Bit Software took the name Team17."

When Allister was asked to create the title tune for *Alien Breed,* we're told he didn't have much to go by. "The only reference I had was the first [part] of the game and I played it when it was in an early stage," he adds. "The graphics, particularly Rico Holmes' iconic title screen, led me down a spooky, atmospheric path." But that wasn't his only influence. "I probably drew inspiration from several C64 games, with *Knuckle Buster* being one of them. I was also very much inspired by Jean-Michel Jarre's use of choir," he continues. "I remember starting out with just good drums, slap bass and the spooky choir voice and getting some good feedback from Team17. The other inspiration would have been the choir sounds that I had recently acquired on an Akai S950 sampler. I often found that the sounds themselves drove my early compositions."

The tune was written on an Amiga 500, using a music composition tool called SoundMon. Created by Brian Postma, this music tracker appeared in 1989 and it was a popular choice in the demoscene and among game developers. It allowed musicians to make the most of the four audio channels provided by the Amiga's Paula chip, with 15 synth-style instruments available. "SoundMon enabled me to use new composition techniques, such as writing very small note sequences, just eight beats long, and sequencing them together creatively. Each eight-beat sequence could be transposed by pitch or instrument used, opening up endless possibilities," Allister says. The result of this can be heard many times within the *Alien Breed* title tune. "It has the same sequences transposed or used in a new way," he explains.

Despite its usefulness, SoundMon wasn't without its problems, as Allister tell us. "Using samples on the Amiga was fairly expensive in terms of disk space so I eventually had to remove many of them and replace them with tiny waveforms modified in pitch and volume, in real-time to bring back the flavour of the originals."

The result was a stunning, lively piece that dripped with atmosphere, giving both a sense of danger and a feeling of haunted isolation. It was also something of an epic. "The original version I composed didn't make it into the first game and it was the longest track I have ever composed at 35 minutes long," Allister says. "The version that made it into the game was cut down to 15 minutes but a variation was included in the *Special Edition* pack several years later." It remains a fan favourite. ✱

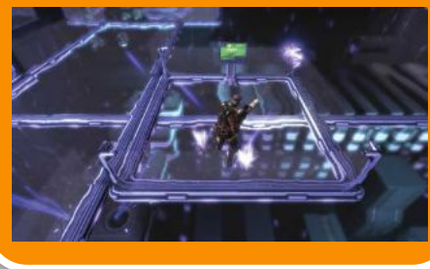
» [Amiga] Allister paid Brian Postma £100 as a thank you for creating SoundMon, the music app he used to make the *Alien Breed* title tune.

EVOLVING A CLASSIC

Remakes and insights

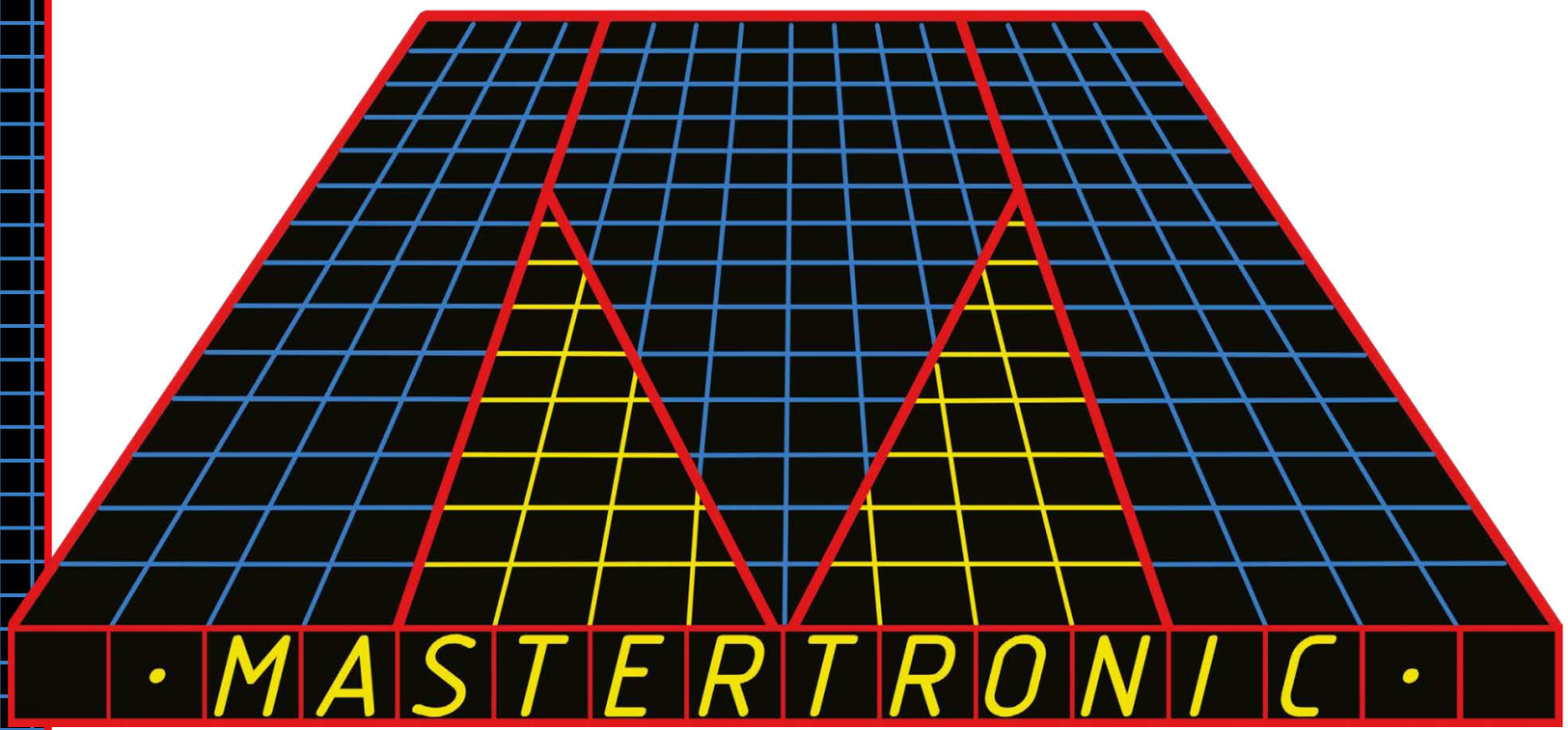
■ *Alien Breed* became a series which initially continued until 1996 with the release of *Alien Breed 3D II: The Killing Grounds*. In 2009, however, Team17 revived the franchise with *Alien Breed: Evolution* for the Xbox 360. The retro-inspired remake was powered by the Unreal 3 engine and it featured both a single-player adventure and a two-player co-operative battle mode for online and offline play. The game also included Allister Brimble's remake of the *Alien Breed* opening track which could be heard in the credit section.

Revisiting the theme altered Allister's perception of the original. "I started to hear different things in it," he admits. Allister's influences had evolved too. "Some of the amazing techniques that Hans Zimmer introduced to film music were a definite game-changer and I was able to inject many of these ideas into the track to give it a more modern edge. I still prefer the original though."



» [Amiga] The game features digitised speech including the infamous "Warning… destruction imminent" announcement by actress (and Allister's mother) Lynette Reade.

THE RETRO GAMER GUIDE TO



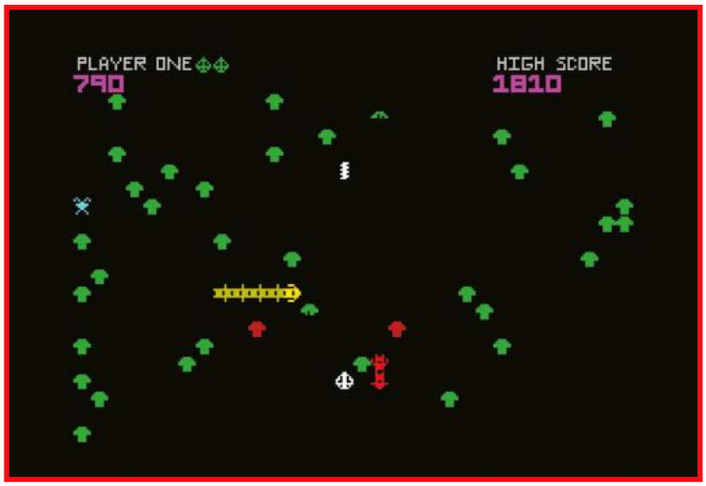
THE EARLY MASTERS OF THE BUDGET GAME PUT GAMES FIRMLY IN THE PUBLIC EYE BY CAPITALISING ON THE NEW WAVE OF AFFORDABLE HOME COMPUTERS. WE TAKE A LOOK AT SOME OF MASTERTRONIC'S PROMINENT RELEASES

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES

Founded in 1983, Mastertronic made videogames both affordable and widely accessible. The company, formed by Martin Alper, Frank Herman, Terry Medway and Alan Sharam, began releasing a huge number of budget-priced titles in 1984, having become the first to spy a fresh market opportunity. But Mastertronic also had a trick up its sleeve. Rather than sell via mail order or solely through specialist outlets like other publishers, it made its games available in newsagents, corner shops and even petrol stations. They became impulse purchases at pocket-money prices and, combined, Mastertronic games sold in their millions.

Mastertronic introduced gamers to some of Britain's finest programmers, graphics artists and musicians and it helped to kick-start the UK software industry. Prominent names associated with the company included Richard and David Darling who went on to found Codemasters, as well as Shaun Southern who developed games for Mr Chip Software, which later became Magnetic Fields. Iconic musicians Rob Hubbard and David Whittaker also contributed heavily to Mastertronic titles. They put tremendous effort into games that sold for just £1.99 and some titles, such as David Jones' *Magic Knight* series, were on a par with full-price releases.

Of course, there were many average games too, as you'd expect from such a prolific publisher. But although the company eventually merged with Virgin and later got taken over by Sega (with Mastertronic having become the UK distributor for the Master System), one thing's for sure, this is a company that punched above its weight and will never be forgotten. ✱



SPECTIPEDE

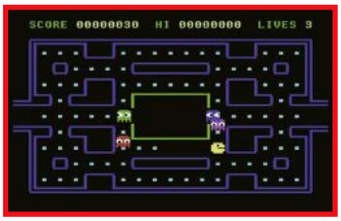
ZX Spectrum, Various, 1984

Centipede's runaway arcade success in 1981 meant clones were still all the rage a couple of years later. Among them was *Spectipede* – originally developed and released for the Spectrum by R&R Software but also an early hit for Mastertronic which quickly took on this rather faithful recreation and rereleased it as a £1.99 budget title. Later converted to other 8-bit computers, *Spectipede* could be enjoyed by one or two players and the aim was to blast away at a lengthy creature as it made its way down the screen, causing it to split into two pieces with each hit. Players also had to avoid other enemies and look to clear the screen of mushrooms – especially the poisoned ones which, if hit by the Spectipede, would cause it to drop towards the player. Sure, it wasn't much to look at, but it nevertheless sold 178,115 copies.

BMX RACERS

C64, ZX Spectrum, 1984

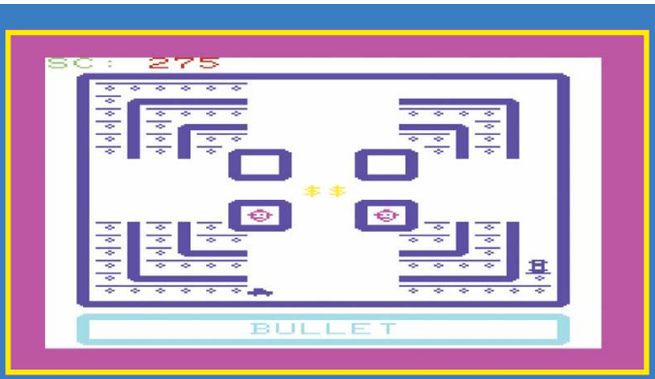
BMX Racers was a huge hit for Mastertronic, selling a whopping 345,423 copies. But there were two versions of the game written by Richard and David Darling: the brothers who were not only prolific contributors to Mastertronic's catalogue but later went on to found Codemasters. The first (shown here), produced using The Games Creator, a software-maker package developed by the Darlings, includes a stick-wielding granny, a second biker and moving cars. Yet it was pulled within weeks and replaced with a slightly better version. Players simply had to get from A to B without colliding with obstacles and its massive success led to Codemasters' release of *BMX Simulator*.



MUNCH MANIA

C64, 1984

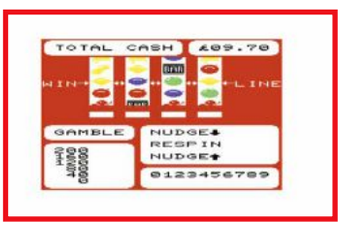
Goodbye Blinky, Pinky, Inky and Clyde and hello Nasty, Meany, Greedy and Lazy. As you may have guessed, this is yet another *Pac-Man* clone and, while it looks very much like the original with its blue-walled maze, colourful ghosts and a yellow pie-shaped main character, there is one fundamental difference. The pellet-gobbling hero in Martin Ellis' rendition seems to shift faster than Usain Bolt, making for a rather challenging seat-of-your-pants experience.



BULLET

VIC-20, 1984

Written by David Darling for the Commodore VIC-20, *Bullet* was originally published as *Robot Mouse* via the Darling brothers' first company, Galactic Software. Although not much of a looker and a riff on Sega's *Head On*, the game's initial aim was to outfox a police car in a chase around a *Pac-Man*-esque maze. This was made challenging by virtue of the cops driving in the opposite direction to the player. The action then switched to a *Snake*-inspired bank raid.



VEGAS JACKPOT

C64, Various, 1984

Essentially a fruit machine simulator with no real payouts, this game was a rerelease of *Jackpot* – a title developed and published by Mr Chip Software the previous year. Renamed and proving to be a big seller, it marked the start of a fruitful partnership between Mastertronic and Mr Chip (the company which evolved into Magnetic Fields). The game, while also relatively basic, also went beyond the simplicity of merely spinning reels by allowing them to be held or nudged. Some nice sound effects rounded off the 'action'.

CHILLER

C64, Various, 1984

Chiller on the Commodore 64 quickly ran into a bit of bother. The game's music by David Dunn was deemed to be very similar to Michael Jackson's chart hit *Thriller* and it not only forced Mastertronic to pay a royalty but also change the tune. As it happened, the five locations in this five-screen game were also inspired by *Thriller* but Richard and David Darling's colourful horror-themed platformer required no further alterations.

FINDERS KEEPERS

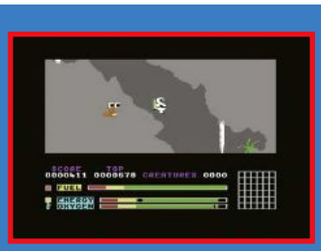
ZX Spectrum, Various, 1985

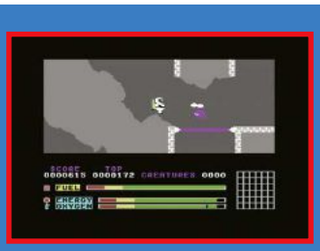
This is the first entry in the popular *Magic Knight* series. Coded by David Jones, the game was inspired by a love of text adventures, *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*. The result was a fun flick-screen platformer interspersed with large scrolling mazes and plenty of objects for solving puzzles. With colourful graphics by Ray Owen, *Finders Keepers* became one of Mastertronic's early standout titles.

ACTION BIKER

C64, Various, 1985

KP Snacks decided to make more of Clumsy Colin – a character who had appeared in adverts for KP Skips and also featured in his own strip in British comic *Buster*. This resulted in him starring in a videogame that had players zooming around on a bike around a town. For the Atari 8-bit and C64, the players enjoyed an isometric view and looked for items that would enable Colin to compete in a drag race. On the ZX Spectrum, players traversed a pseudo-3D landscape and sought items inside homes. The C64 version was the best by miles.





PHANTOM OF THE ASTEROID

C64, 1985

Martin Ellis' single-player, side-scrolling, action-adventure game may not have been visually impressive but Rob Hubbard's soundtrack showcased the remarkable capabilities of the C64's SID chip. It was also a tense, challenging affair. Players controlled a jetpack-wearing astronaut navigating a sprawling maze in search of 36 uranium cubes, blasting enemies, avoiding hazards and seeking fuel. They also had to complete the game with only a single life.

FORMULA 1 SIMULATOR

ZX Spectrum, Various, 1985

Mastertronic's best-selling game with 568,013 sales to its name, *Formula 1 Simulator* started life in 1984 as a ZX Spectrum game by Spirit Software. It looked great, putting players behind the wheel, and it allowed gamers to race along a solid selection of ten circuit faves from Monza to Monaco.

TUTTI FRUTTI

C16, Plus/4, 1985

Exclusive to the Commodore 16 and Plus/4 machines, this juicy *Mr Do!* variant by Mr Chip's Shaun Southern involved controlling a character called Super Strawberry through a series of levels, collecting cherries while avoiding the Acid Apple Gang. Colourful graphics and a pleasant tune helped to make this a sweet game.

NONTERRAQUEOUS

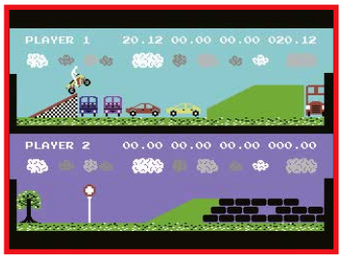
Amstrad CPC, Various, 1985

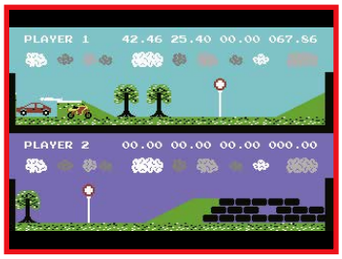
With an astonishing 1,004 locations spanning 42 levels, *Nonterraqueous* set out to impress gamers through its immense scale. By reusing tile graphics and assembling the world from compact map data, developers Stephen N Curtis and Mark Jacobs were able to fit the sprawling adventure within the tight memory limits of 8-bit computers.

SPELLBOUND

Amstrad CPC, Various, 1985

Mastertronic struck gold with *Finders Keepers* so it was overjoyed when David Jones created an even better sequel. The graphic adventure *Spellbound* was praised for its use of a new menu system called Windimation which enabled players to quickly gain access to key commands without having to type text. It was also lauded for its strategy, detailed graphics and music by Rob Hubbard. Favourably compared with full-price games by critics, it was rather fitting, then, that *Spellbound* was released on the higher-quality Mastertronic Added Dimension (MAD) label. This added an extra quid to the price of a normal Mastertronic release but it was worth every penny.





KIKSTART: OFF ROAD SIMULATOR

C64, Various, 1985

Kikstart was originally published by Mr Chip Software for the Commodore 64 but it was also released by Mastertronic under the name *Kikstart: Off Road Simulator* and on various other systems. It was a simple game, letting players take to the track and complete a series of stunts. But the split-screen action made it easy for two players to enjoy the game together – a technique the developers later used for *Lotus Esprit Turbo Challenge*. Such was the game's success, a far superior sequel was made in 1987. *Kikstart 2* was so good, it's often said to be the finest Mastertronic game.

THE LAST V8

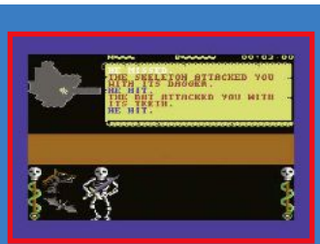
C64, Various, 1985

David Darling's *The Last V8* was a top-down driving game set in 2008, seven years after a devastating global war. Driving a special radiation-shielded car, players had to return to the safe Undercity as quickly as possible, navigating narrow roads and tricky bends under threat of an atomic bomb being dropped.

ROCKMAN

C16, Various, 1985

Rockman was released on a variety of platforms and the gameplay experience differed depending on which computer was being used. If played on Commodore's VIC-20, 16 or Plus/4, gamers would enjoy a *Boulder Dash*-style puzzle arcade game, while ZX Spectrum owners were treated to a more fast-paced alternative.



MASTER OF MAGIC

C64, ZX Spectrum, 1985

Another Richard Darling classic, *Master Of Magic* was a superb, fast-paced RPG about a hero tasked with finding an immortality amulet. Mixing text and graphics, it allowed players to view the action from both top-down and side-on views. It also had a joystick-controlled menu and it was memorably accompanied by Rob Hubbard's amazing music: a cover version of *Shibolet* by Synergy.

CASHING IN THEIR CHIPS

SHAUN SOUTHERN REFLECTS ON MR CHIP SOFTWARE'S CONTRIBUTION TO MASTERTRONIC'S CATALOGUE

How did you first come into contact with Mastertronic, Shaun?
Doug Braisby who set up Mr Chip Software had been selling games at full price for a while but he wasn't really getting them into many shops. I'm not sure how it all happened but he met up with, I think, Frank Herman from Mastertronic who had the distribution side of things sorted. They struck a deal. Mastertronic took some of the existing Mr Chip titles – *Olympic Skier*, *Vegas Jackpot* – and we started working on more. Pretty soon we at Mr Chip Software were working almost exclusively for them.

What was it like working with a publisher whose whole business model was selling affordable games?
Mastertronic took pretty much anything we produced. They didn't pester us or tell us what to do, they just let us get on with creating games and they put them out. Some of the games that were developed were quicker to make than others and some sold for more than £1.99: *Hero Of The Golden Talisman* was part of the MAD range so it sold for £2.99 rather than £1.99, for example. I think as a company we got 10p per game, of which I got 2p, but some games took two weeks to write and sold lots so they were still quite lucrative. Mastertronic even commissioned a version of *Speed King* which was pretty much my Formula 1 racing game with a bike in it. They did conversions of some games for us too.

***Kikstart* and *Kikstart 2* showed that you were still looking to create the best games you could, didn't it?**
The original *Kikstart* was initially full price, I think, but the second one had Andrew's graphics in it and a lot more gameplay, and an editor. But yes, we just created the best games we could: simple, fun, fast-paced games, throwaway if you like, and I don't think we skimped on quality at all.

But were you under pressure to produce games quickly?
Nope, they just let us get on with it. I can't remember any pressure from Mastertronic at all. It's not like I took long to make games, though. I made a lot of games for the C16, most versions of C64 games, but not many people did. I think at one point we had five out of the top ten C16 games in the charts.

So what was the relationship like between independent developers and Mastertronic back then?
We went down to London a few times and had lunch, that was about it. But we met the Darlings on a riverboat on the Thames when Mastertronic was launching *The Last V8* and *Hero Of The Golden Talisman*. There were a load of journalists on the boat and we didn't let them off until they had played the games. Doug seemed to get on well enough with developers and they always paid on time!

THE MASTER OF MUSIC

ROB HUBBARD PROVIDED THE SOUNDTRACK FOR MANY MASTERTRONIC GAMES

What was your first impression of Mastertronic as a company, Rob?
I found Mastertronic to be a great company to work for. They always paid the bills on time and they also gave me lots of work.

How did you end up working on Mastertronic games?
In my early career, I was just a pro musician and I'd toured with bands and done residencies in clubs. My big break in videogames was with a puzzle game published by Gremlin Graphics called *Thing On A Spring* but I think Mastertronic asked me to compose music for their games because of the music demo that I had created back then. At that time, I had recorded tunes on to a cassette tape and I did some mail outs to try and get some work.

Did Mastertronic treat music as an important selling point or was it something added late?
Music was always added late back then. I don't think anyone regarded music as a selling point back in those early days of games.

Were you given enough time to create music for Mastertronic games and did their tight budgets force you to become more efficient?
I used to do those jobs very quickly. They would only take me maybe a day or two. I don't think budgets were ever an issue when I was creating music for those games, since the budgets were always so small.

Which of your Mastertronic game soundtracks are you most proud of? Which were the most difficult or challenging?
I don't know or remember which ones were specifically Mastertronic but I would say maybe the text adventure *Kentilla*, *Master Of Magic* and the action puzzle game *One Man And His Droid*. *Master Of Magic* was an interesting one for me because of the ring mod effects. The other two tunes were a bit more involved musically and they had a couple of interesting ideas in them.

You met a lot of people at Mastertronic including the Darlings, and David Whittaker. Did Mastertronic effectively shape and steer your early career?
Mastertronic allowed me to establish my career in the games business and it was not only pioneering but instrumental in forging the way for the evolution of videogames. It was also how I met so many interesting, creative and clever people back then.

NINJA

Amstrad CPC, Various, 1986

■ Developed by Sculptured Software and released on the MAD label, *Ninja* appeared to split opinion among gamers and critics. But while it was easy to play, there was much to commend in this beat-'em-up which involved rescuing a princess imprisoned in a palace by using your fists and feet as well as a samurai sword, a throwing dagger and shurikens.

KANE

C64, Various, 1986

■ This rootin' tootin' Wild West action game was set to be a full-price title but Software Projects believed it would sell better in the budget market so sold it to Mastertronic. Shifting more than 250,000 units across all platforms, players enjoyed the game's four levels – two shooting and two horseback – as well as the smooth animation and sampled sound.

VIDEO MEANIES

C64, Plus4, 1986

■ *Video Meanies* was set inside a video shop located within a castle and it had a rather bizarre plot: a load of videos had been left running so players had to control a maintenance robot to turn them off. This would be a simple task if it wasn't for a host of Meanies hellbent on killing the robot. Cue a lot of shooting and dodging, key-based puzzles and dangerous walls to avoid.

THE EXPLOITS OF FINGERS MALONE

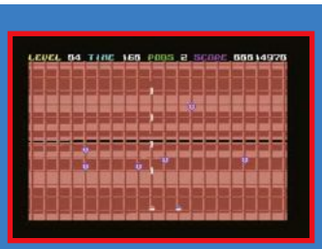
C16, 1986

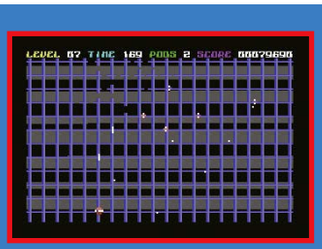
■ This colourful platformer for the Commodore 16 was a fixed-screen gem spanning 15 challenging levels. Players took control of Fingers Malone who wanted to 'recover' cash stolen from banks. This entailed collecting keys scattered throughout a gang hideout to open a series of safes, while avoiding the raiders who had stolen the loot in the first place. Entertaining and unforgiving, it was all too easy to die but there were some clever touches to maintain interest.

FEUD

ZX Spectrum, Various, 1987

Feud was a fantasy game designed by brothers John and Ste Pickford and the concept was sold to Binary Design which took on its development. This was an unusual move at the time but it worked well. Players enjoyed a large, well-mapped (except for the C64) playing area, cartoony graphics and an innovative playing mechanic which allowed spells to be created by combining herbs and other items. It was the first game released on Mastertronic's Bulldog Software label.





POD: PROOF OF DESTRUCTION

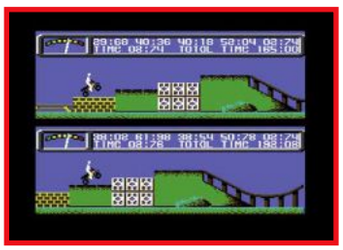
C64, Various, 1987

Inspired by Jeff Minter's *Gridrunner*, Shaun Southern created a strong, fast-paced 25-level, psychedelic shoot-'em-up which had players blasting away until the time limit was reached in order to gain a high score. The player's spacecraft needed to move on a grid and if it became damaged by an exploding enemy, movement would be temporarily hampered.

STORMBRINGER

Amstrad CPC, Various, 1987

Having released the third *Magic Knight* game in 1986, *Knight Tyme*, Mastertronic wrapped up the series with *Stormbringer*. While the Windimation menu-driven interface remained, David Jones added more arcade elements for balance. There was also plenty of scope for casting spells and super music by David Whittaker, helping to bring *Stormbringer* to a fittingly ambitious finale.



KIKSTART 2

C64, Various, 1987

Kikstart's sequel is arguably one of Mastertronic's best releases and is another superb offering from Shaun Southern. Andrew Morris' graphics add greatly to the game's appeal, while new mechanics and introductions like night-time and snow-based levels enhance its variety. Best of all was the excellent construction kit, which added hours of fun. All of this for just £1.99 was staggering.

GHOSTBUSTERS

C64, Various, 1988

Mastertronic saw huge value in other publisher's work so it launched a rerelease label called Ricochet. *Ghostbusters* – originally designed by David Crane for Activision and giving players the chance to set up their own ghostbusting franchise – was the greatest success, a chart-topper selling 412,922 copies. But the label also included games by Martech, Ultimate Play The Game, Melbourne House and Gremlin Graphics. *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* was the next biggest seller for the Ricochet label.

SIDEWINDER

Amiga, Various, 1988

In 1987, Mastertronic launched Arcadia Systems in California, building multi-game coin-op cabinets based on the Amiga chipset. Such was its failure, it nearly sank the company but Synergistic Software created *SideWinder* and it went down a storm. Released by Mastertronic on the Amiga, Atari ST and PC Booter, it was voted the best 16-bit budget release.

BOMB FUSION

ZX Spectrum, Various, 1989

By this point, Mastertronic had merged with the Virgin Group to create Virgin Mastertronic and games such as *Bomb Fusion* carried the company's new branding on their splash screens. This humorous single-screen platform-puzzler (which had the hero driving a Sinclair C5), saw terrorists plant bombs at a nuclear processing plant and players acting fast to defuse them.

MINDTRAP

ZX Spectrum, Various, 1989

Mindtrap, by a team of Yugoslav (Serbian) programmers, didn't have quite the same impact as that other East European puzzler, *Tetris*, but it was just as absorbing and addictive. Players had to swap coloured dice, four at a time, so that they'd line up in columns of a single colour. With 999,999 levels, there was certainly a lot of mileage in the game.

SPIRIT OF EXCALIBUR

PC, Various, 1990

Virgin Mastertronic's focus on budget games was all but over but its impact in the market had been waning for a while. Synergistic Software's *Spirit Of Excalibur* was a full-price release blending elements of RPG, adventure and strategy titles. It delivered a rich experience filled with character interaction, spell casting and depth.

Prince Of Persia

COME FOR THE BOX ART, STAY FOR THE ADVENTURE

» SNES » 1992 » ARSYS SOFTWARE

Jordan Mechner's *Prince Of Persia* is a game I've never experienced on its original system. I never owned an Apple II and while there was apparently a fantastic version for the Amstrad, that too passed me by.

My first encounter with the prince was via Sega's Master System and bloody good fun it was too. It captured all the slick animation of the original game and it proved to be a tremendous adventure, even if I failed to make any significant headway in it.

As much as I love the Master System version of *Prince Of Persia*, the SNES conversion by Arsys Software is the one I always think of today, although that's largely due to the game's stunning box art. For some reason, when the Master System version debuted, it featured box art that made the titular prince look more like Luke Skywalker than the Persian hero he actually was. However, the box art for the Super Famicom conversion still looks incredible. It boasts an almost ethereal-like representation of the prince, looking over his shoulder and holding aloft his sword, while the princess and several enemies adorn the background. It's a genuinely dazzling piece of work that's filled with intricate details and highlights just how important art could be when you were tentatively choosing a new game.

By comparison, the US box art is bland and dull, featuring the prince leaping over the game's spike-encrusted logo and little else. The PAL art is the same as Japan's, but is heavily cropped and lacks the same impact. Fortunately, whatever region of the SNES game you do end up playing you'll find it to be worthy of your time.

While the SNES version features the same life-like animation of the earlier games, it ups the ante by delivering more detailed visuals, particularly in the game's backgrounds. You get a real sense of travelling through dingy dungeons, while slick special effects make battling skeletons through heat-baked caverns feel exceptionally atmospheric. Add in some neat additional levels and Arsys Software's version really does hold up. The strict 60-minute time limit still causes me issues, but the game's sheer magic still keeps pulling me back, even after all this time. ✱

ULTIMATE GUIDE

GRAND THEFT AUTO

ALMOST 30 YEARS AGO, SCOTTISH DEVELOPER DMA CAR-JACKED THE GAMES INDUSTRY, INSTIGATING A FRANCHISE THAT WOULD REVOLUTIONISE GAMING. WITH GTA VI WAITING TO POUNCE AROUND THE CORNER, THIS IS OUR GUIDE TO THE GAME THAT KICK-STARTED THE WORLD'S BIGGEST VIDEOGAMES SERIES. LET'S CALL UP THE BOY AND GO FOR A JOYRIDE!

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** BMG INTERACTIVE
- **DEVELOPER:** DMA DESIGN
- **PLATFORM:** PC, PLAYSTATION, GAME BOY COLOR
- **RELEASED:** 1997
- **GENRE:** ARCADE ADVENTURE/ DRIVING

By the summer of 1996, PC gaming had been transformed by the arrival of 3D graphics cards. *Quake* had just blown us away, and it felt like every other game was a first-person shooter. But in a dark corner of Scotland, something different was bubbling that would change gaming forever.

Grand Theft Auto, released in the winter of 1997, is the tale of a low-level hood eager to rise through the ranks of criminality. At the start of the game, the player selects one of eight characters, from cigar-chewing Bubba to the grinning Katie and brooding Kivlov. Once chosen, they're dropped into the bustling Liberty City, but there's no time to take in the sights. That phone's ringing; you'd better answer it if you know what's good for you.

> "IT WAS A RACE AROUND THE CITY GAME THAT HAD A STORY"
> RUSSELL KAY

The caller is a representative of Robert 'Bubby' Seragliano, a notorious Liberty City gang boss. Bubby's rap sheet includes robbery, bribery, extortion and murder, but that's of no concern to you in your quest to climb the city's organised crime tree. Bubby's tasks start hot, as he sends the player to escort 'Crazy' Jimmy Waterson to his nearby hideout. Sounds simple – only Jimmy's just robbed a bank, and the police are soon all over your tail. It isn't long before Bubby's got you delivering drugs, offing rivals and, in a dramatic early event, driving a truck laden with explosives into a building to kill the police chief. Clearly, Bubby is totally unconcerned with collateral damage.

The player acquires missions in two ways: by answering ringing phones (fortunately, no one else seems interested in them) or by entering specific cars dotted around the city. As they complete more errands for Bubby – including a mission with deadly remote control cars, clearly inspired by the *Dirty Harry* sequel, *The Dead Pool* – their notoriety increases, until the heat gets too much. Worried he's going to get his collar felt, Bubby dispatches the player across the country to San Andreas.

There's no laying low, however, with the local gangs soon in touch, having heard of ▶

» [PC] Even the DMA logo gets in on the act. DMA would later become Rockstar North.

» [PC] Fail, and *Grand Theft Auto* delivers a withering summation of your efforts.

» [PC] If the cops are in a good mood, they'll arrest rather than shoot.

» [PC] An early mission sees the player's rising hood pick up a bank robber in this taxi.

GTA'S 2D LEGACY

RETRO GAMER LOOKS BACK AT GTA BEFORE IT WENT 3D

GRAND THEFT AUTO LONDON 1969

■ This mission pack for the original *Grand Theft Auto* takes the vehicular mayhem back to late-Sixties London. Only, it's not the vibe that's swinging, but the violent crime, as the player once more tackles rival gangs and the police throughout the city. More of the same. But in London. That OK with you, pal?

GRAND THEFT AUTO LONDON 1961

■ *Grand Theft Auto* warped back another eight years in 1999 with this second expansion. A prequel to *London 1969*, the core gameplay is unchanged, albeit with a fresh selection of vehicles to steal. The localisation changes continue (you're 'nicked' instead of 'busted'), it features the series' first drive-by shooting, and is a PC exclusive.

GRAND THEFT AUTO 2

■ Despite pressure from some quarters to transform the series into 3D, the stoically 2D *Grand Theft Auto* 2 appeared in the Autumn of 1999. Set within a new location, the retro-futuristic Anywhere City, the player is Claude Speed, another rising punk looking to cement their name by performing tasks for the various criminal gangs within the city.

GRAND THEFT AUTO ADVANCE

■ *GTA*'s final top-down iteration appeared in 2004, acting as a prequel to 2001's *Grand Theft Auto III*. The scene is once more Liberty City, and focusses on Mike, a small-time hood investigating his partner's murder. While it felt like a backward step, its open world appealed to critics and gamers, whereas the zoomed-in view, which hampered high-speed chases, did not.

A TALE OF THREE CITIES

THE ICONIC CITIES OF GRAND THEFT AUTO

LIBERTY CITY

■ With its central Manhattan-esque island (Liberty Island) and its dense, urbanised districts, *Grand Theft Auto*'s first location is clearly based on New York City. It's divided into 14 districts, and all are the backdrop to a vicious spat between the Vercotti and Sonetti crime syndicates. Served by a train line that loops loosely around the perimeter, its busy streets, choked with vulnerable vehicles, are perfect for a rising crime star.

SAN ANDREAS

■ Named after the geological fault line that runs over 1,000 kilometres through California, *Grand Theft Auto*'s second city takes its inspiration from San Francisco, boasting trams, sloping roads and, most notably, an impressive crimson bridge. Leading the way in criminality is Chinatown's feared Eastern gang, led by the mysterious Uncle Fu.

VICE CITY

■ With its palm trees, beaches and tourist hot spots, Vice City is redolent of Miami, in particular. Jamaican gang The Brotherhood Of Jah Army Of Love rules in Vice City, dealing drugs and ruthlessly exterminating rivals. With its record-breaking murder rate and an incompetent police department, Vice City is perhaps *GTA*'s most infamous – and dangerous – city. Still, there's a nice beach.

» [PC] The player answers phones to receive updates and missions.

» [PC] Busted again, this time in San Andreas.

» [PC] Someone wants you to do something. Pick up the phone, and you'll find out who.

» [PC] Arriving in San Andreas.

your criminal prowess back in Liberty City. The chief villain here is crime syndicate boss Uncle Fu, but rival El Burro wants a piece of the player, too, as does the local yakuza. Succeed in San Andreas, and it's off to another location, the warm and sunny Vice City. As its name suggests, organised crime is rampant, a fertile ground for the player to gain further infamy. Now, we step right into the middle of a white-hot drug war between corrupt Vice City chief Samuel Deever and The Brotherhood Of Jah Army Of Love. Whichever side the player chooses, you can be sure of one thing: the blood will flow in the south, of both the guilty and the innocent.

> "WE WERE REALLY SURPRISED THAT WE MANAGED TO GET EVERYTHING IN"
> RUSSELL KAY

In *Grand Theft Auto*, the currency earned from nefarious acts is the player's total points, and each segment requires a certain score to progress. Missions and sidequests are updated via the player's pager in the top-left corner, while a small yellow arrow points you in the direction of your current target. Most missions do not have a time limit, leaving the player to explore the city freely. Cars can be jacked, innocents run over, and traffic regulations ignored with gleeful malice. But beware – cause too much chaos, and the cops will take a disliking to your face or vehicle, doggedly pursuing you throughout the streets. The choice here is to either use one of the rare bribe cards or get a spray job, thus instantly fooling the law and downgrading your wanted rating.

Get caught, and your gear is confiscated, you receive a points reduction, and are transported to the city police department, potentially jeopardising your current mission.

Points are awarded for every action in *Grand Theft Auto*. Shunt someone at the lights – ten points. Car-jack a passing motorist or run over a pedestrian – 100 apiece. Yet, while killing police and selling stolen cars at the docks yields more impressive cash, to reach the required score to progress, the player must complete the various missions. Meanwhile, the pinnacle of mayhem is discovering a Kill Frenzy challenge. These generally require the player to murder and destroy as much as possible within a short time. Succeed, and a fat, juicy bonus is yours. Also scattered around the city are wooden crates. Smashing one of these reveals a bonus item, most commonly a weapon. The player begins with their fists (useful for intimidation but little else) and can pick up a pistol, a machine gun and, occasionally, a rocket launcher or flamethrower.

Visually, *Grand Theft Auto* was behind the times back in 1997. First-person shooters ruled, and the antiquated top-down view

THINGS TO SEE AND DO IN THE CITY

VISIT THE DOCKS

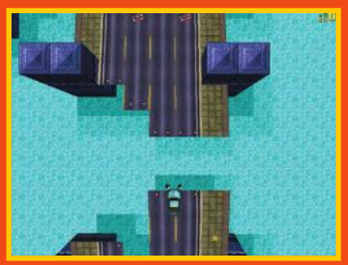
There's always plenty to do at the docks other than taking in the view. Such as flogging off hot cars for cash using the cranes.

CRIMSON BRIDGE

Why not take a peaceful cruise over San Andreas' impressive crimson bridge, a tribute to San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge?

VICE BEACH

There's plenty of iniquity on these golden sands, so don't think for a moment you'll have time to relax and soak up the rays.



BRIDGE (ALMOST) OUT

Here's one for adrenaline hounds: Liberty City's Schlechberg Bridge is under construction, but don't let that stop you from using it.

» [PC] Ouch… and ouch.

» [PC] Smash crates for bonus items.

SIGHTSEEING ADVENTURES, GTA STYLE

RIDE THE TRAIN

■ An overland train system circles Liberty City. If you don't fancy jacking yet another vehicle, it's a handy way of seeing the city.

DEVELOPER Q+A

RETRO GAMER CATCHES UP WITH RUSSELL KAY OF VISUAL SCIENCE, THE DEVELOPER BEHIND GTA'S PLAYSTATION PORT

How did your company come to work on *GTA*, *Russell*?

I was one of the founding members of DMA Design and worked on *Lemmings* and *Lemmings 2* before I left to start Visual Science. I kept in touch with the team (our office was just around the corner from DMA), and we had quite a bit of PlayStation experience. We heard that DMA was working on a PlayStation version of *GTA*, and when I bumped into Dave Jones, I asked how it was getting on. He said they might need a bit of help. It turned out they had little more than a demo that wasn't running well, and they needed a lot of help. So we got pulled into working on the PlayStation version.

What did you think of the concept?

It was a race around the city game that had a story, and we did not see the controversial elements. I don't think any of the dev team really saw that; it was manufactured closer to the end. We saw all the tech issues: a game that took around 40MB on PC had to be squeezed into a machine with only 2MB total and a CPU that was vastly underpowered compared to the PC.

Were you worried about the reception it might get (due to the violence)?

Most of the violence was due to the open-world nature, where you could drive on the pavements, and the pedestrians were there, so you had to collide with them – we did not really see the problem at the time, and weren't thinking about the reception, as we had a very tight deadline to meet.

Did you have to omit anything significant in the PS1 version?

The only thing we ended up omitting were the train missions, as we couldn't fit the trains into memory for a long time. We eventually saved enough RAM to get the trains running in the city, but not enough to let the player ride them, so we had to cut a single mission that required it. We were really surprised that we managed to get everything in, though it was a huge game, and we were determined to get as much in as possible. We were very close to DMA (you could walk between the offices in less than five minutes), and we had members of Q&A and the development team in and out of the offices.

Were you pleased with the final result?

Yes, we were very proud and pleased with the reception. We managed to fit a lot into a tiny machine and enjoyed the experience.

Our thanks to Russell for his time.

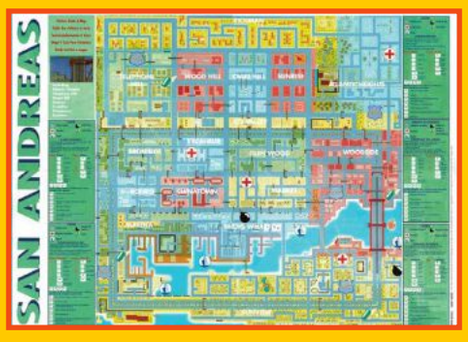
» [PC] The dependable but boring Mundano, a combination of Mondeo and mundane.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

WITH CONTROVERSY RAGING ON GTA VI'S DIGITAL RELEASE, RETRO GAMER LOOKS BACK AT THE ORIGINAL'S PACKAGING

Grand Theft Auto, like most of its PC game peers, came packaged in a large cardboard box, two black halves shrouded by a glossy slipcase. While this was primarily to look more impressive on store shelves, the extra space also allowed for developers and publishers to include extra value items. In *GTA*'s case, it was obvious from playing the game that players needed guidance in navigating the large cities, especially given the absence of an in-game map. The solution was three beautiful maps spread over two glossy A3 sheets. Back-to-back are Liberty City and San Andreas, while a glorious piece of artwork that perfectly captures the vibe of *Grand Theft Auto*, and would go on to inspire future game covers, backs the Vice City map. While we're on that subject, *GTA* uses a 'fisheye' photo for its cover, with what appears to be the Trump Tower in the background and a speeding police car giving chase in the foreground. Elsewhere in the box, players got the ubiquitous registration card and the game's CD and manual, housed in a jewel case and set on a cardboard riser.

To read more about *GTA*'s maps and physical maps, check out **Retro Gamer**'s The Map Makers feature in issue 253.



» The original map for San Andreas. It was vital for getting around the city.

CONVERSION CAPERS

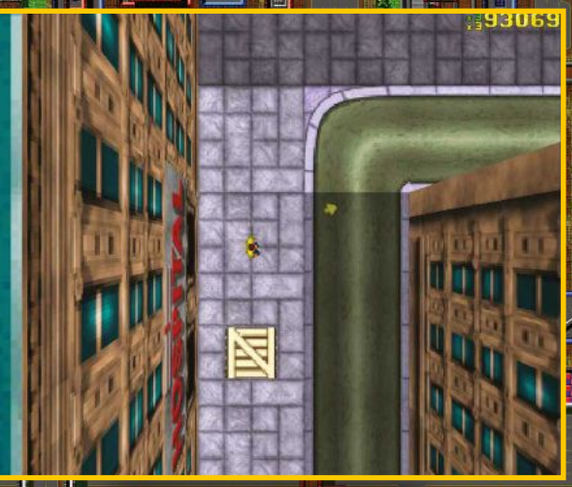
BUCKLE UP AS WE EXPLORE THE DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF GRAND THEFT AUTO

PC (DOS & WINDOWS, 1997)

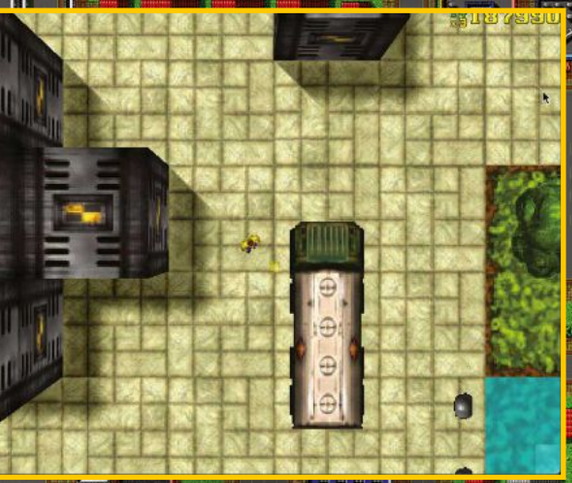
With Microsoft's Windows operating system rapidly taking over the gaming world, DMA designed both DOS and Windows versions of its game. As a precursor to the series' future success, it even includes a multiplayer mode where players compete to cause the most destruction.

PLAYSTATION (1997)

A PlayStation port followed shortly after the PC release, with its controls adapted to the console's iconic controller. It also adopts a more convenient save system, although visual sacrifices are inevitable. The biggest omission, however, is a rideable train line, which led to the dropping of two train-based missions.



» [PC] Back on the streets after a spell in the clink.



» [PC] In one of Liberty City's most fun missions, the player drives this bomb-laden tanker to the police station.

» [PC] *GTA* revels in its lawbreaking destruction.

felt like a throwback to the earlier part of the decade—but there are a few twists that bring it bang up to date. Firstly, it has a dynamic view, the camera panning out the faster the player travels, enabling the thrill of high-speed chases and close-up gunfights. Then there are *Grand Theft Auto*'s three cities, each a hub of citizens, on foot or in a car, innocently going about their day. Police patrol, and if you start to notch too many police heads at the top of the screen, they'll soon be swarming all over you. If you've been really bad, they won't ask questions, either, shooting the player on sight.

> "A FRENZIED MIX OF VIOLENT CRIME AND VEHICULAR PANDEMONIUM"

In a realistic, albeit unusual move, one shot loses a life, forfeiting equipment and cash, although some crates contain a helpful bulletproof jacket. Within the cities, the player can roam and cause chaos to their heart's desire, and complete the occasional mission should they feel the urge. And then there's the music.

Grand Theft Auto took a revolutionary approach to its soundtrack, inspired by the game's central theme. Getting around each city is impractical on foot, leaving the player little choice: stop a car, fling out its driver and steal it. Yet even the most careful driver will eventually accrue so many bumps and dents that its engine starts to croak and grumble, ultimately exploding in a blaze of fire and metal. This forces the player to switch vehicles constantly, and it's here that *GTA*'s audio magic comes into play. Upon entering each vehicle, the radio plays in-game, and the segmented, specific channels often differ depending on which vehicle you've stolen. Swipe a sporty model such as the rapid Cossie or Beast GTS, and you'll get some bangin' dance tunes. Step into the cab of the Juggernaut truck, and country music blares out. On that note, the vehicles are another highlight, many of them based on real-world cars, such as the Ford Cosworth (Cossie) and Mondeo (Mundano). With some of the faster models extremely vulnerable, choosing which car to jack is an important decision.

With more than a little encouragement from DMA and publisher BMG Interactive, *Grand Theft Auto* gained a considerable reputation even before its release. Slapped with an 18 certificate by the BBFC, many observers objected to the nature of its violence towards innocents. But all the headlines and moral outrage did was generate more sales for *Grand Theft Auto*, helping forge the behemoth series we know today. A PlayStation port quickly followed the DOS and Windows games, but with the Sega Saturn version abandoned (likely due to the console's poor reception), the only other way to play *GTA* was through a remarkably faithful Game Boy Color port.

While significantly different visually to the series today, *Grand Theft Auto*'s gameplay theme, a frenzied mix of violent crime and vehicular pandemonium, remains virtually the same. It's hard to imagine the success would have been the same had DMA stuck to its original plan of the player as a police officer. It may have been less controversial, but let's face it, it wouldn't have been anywhere near as fun. ✱

GAME BOY COLOR (1999)

While allegedly converted tile-for-tile from the PC original, this handheld game lacks many of *GTA*'s cities' colours and vibrancy. It is considerably emptier too, and the famous soundtrack is gone, as is all the swearing, blood and violence. Still, it remains an impressive effort by Tarantula to squeeze *GTA*'s world into Nintendo's tiny handheld.

retro GAMER's FAVOURITE...

PENGUINS IN VIDEOGAMES

WE KNOW THAT PENGUINS ARE FLIGHTLESS BIRDS, ADEPT SWIMMERS AND CONGREGATE TOGETHER IN LARGE COLONIES, BUT DID YOU ALSO KNOW THAT THEY'VE TURNED UP IN COUNTLESS VIDEOGAMES OVER THE YEARS? HERE'S A SELECTION OF SOME OF OUR FAVOURITES, HOW MANY OF THE FOLLOWING GAMES HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED?

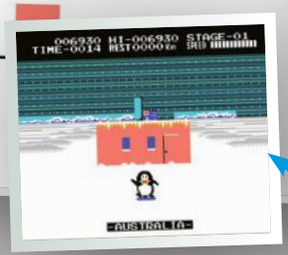
Words by Darran Jones

PENGO

We're not sure how bright red penguins would survive in the hostile wilds of Antarctica, but then Pengo is no ordinary penguin. While most penguins use sheer numbers to try and protect themselves from predators, Pengo instead takes the fight to his antagonists. The plucky bird tears around the screen crushing Sno-bees with well-placed ice blocks, hoping to take them all down so he can continue his rampage on the next level.

KING OF THE ZOO

Few Antarctic species are as competitive as the penguin. If you need further proof, simply look at *King Of The Zoo*, or *Penguin Wars* as it was known in the US. It's a frantic sports game where you start with five balls and then have sixty seconds to get them all on your opponent's side of the playing area. *Penguin Wars*, a modern remake (right), debuted in 2017.



ANTARCTIC ADVENTURE

This 1983 MSX game features the debut of Penta, who would go on to appear in a number of later Konami games. This is an entertaining into-the-screen racer where Penta must leap across cracks and avoid deadly sea lions in order to reach the safety of a nearby ice station. While rather repetitive, it was popular enough to receive a sequel (by Hideo Kojima no less) several years later.

SURF'S UP

When Ubisoft gained the licence to Sony Pictures Animation's 2007 animated film, it decided to go hard, releasing three distinct versions of its game across a variety of systems. Regardless of which version you end up playing, *Surf's Up* is fundamentally a *Tony Hawk's* game with surfboards, but lacks the complexity or level design of those popular games. For hardcore fans only (if the film actually had any).

PARODIUS

While not strictly a proper penguin game, the *Parodius* series is notable because one of the characters you can play as is Penta, in the original MSX game, while his son Pentaro pops up in the sequels. Penta and his son have not only gained the ability to fly, but come equipped with a devastating arsenal of weapons, including bombs and lasers.

PINGUS

Not to be confused with the popular kids' show, *Pingus* is an entertaining puzzle game that's heavily inspired by DMA Designs' *Lemmings*. As with *Lemmings*, the aim of the game is to guide your penguins to the level's exit, but creator Ingo Ruhnke has added plenty of wrinkles to ensure this isn't a direct copycat clone. Ruhnke's game has evolved greatly since its 1998 release, so be sure to check it out.

PRINNY: CAN I REALLY BE THE HERO?

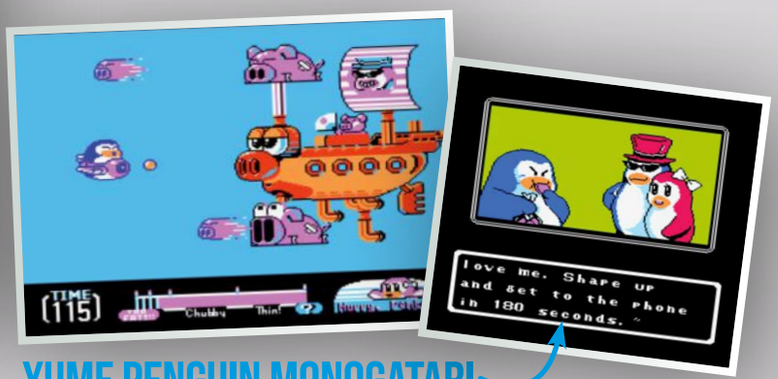
Yes, we know they're technically not 'proper' penguins, but it feels wrong to create a list like this and not include the underdogs of the *Disgaea* series. They starred in two PSP platformers during the mid-Noughties, which were notable for giving you 1,000 lives. You needed them too, as *Prinny* was a punishingly difficult game. It received a HD remaster in 2020, which remains challenging to play.

CLUB PENGUIN

If you were or had a young child in the early Noughties, you'd have been intimately familiar with *Club Penguin*. It was a hugely successful MMO that shared elements with *Animal Crossing*, as it was possible to upgrade your igloo homes and interact with other players. It proved to be so successful that Disney acquired the game in 2007, only to discontinue it ten years later.

PENGUIN LAND

This charming Master System game charges your penguin with guiding three eggs to safety without breaking them. The task proves extremely difficult due to polar bear-like Gangows, deadly flying birds and the fact that your fragile cargo will crack if it falls too far. It handily includes a level editor for when you've mastered the game's 50 levels.



YUME PENGUIN MONOGATARI

This Japanese exclusive once again focusses on Penta The Penguin. Due to putting on weight, his girlfriend is planning to dump him unless he can lose his belly fat and return her phone calls. It's an odd set of requests, but this is an odd game, with Penta dodging food so he can get down to his required weight and tackle the next food-strewn stage.

THE MAKING OF

ESCAPE FROM MONKEY ISLAND

AMID A SLEW OF STAR WARS TITLES CAME THE FOURTH INSTALMENT IN THE MONKEY ISLAND SERIES, WHICH WAS THE LAST OF LUCASARTS' FAMED GRAPHIC ADVENTURE GAMES. CO-DESIGNERS SEAN CLARK AND MIKE STEMMLE FONDLY RECALL STEERING GUYBRUSH THREEPWOOD AND HIS PIRATE CREW INTO UNCHARTED 3D WATERS

WORDS BY SEAN COLE

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS
- **DEVELOPER:** LUCASARTS
- **PLATFORM:** PC, PLAYSTATION 2
- **RELEASED:** 2000
- **GENRE:** GRAPHIC ADVENTURE

The release of *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace* was a seismic cultural event. Inside the LucasArts studio, almost everyone was attempting to capitalise on the extraordinary hype that surrounded the film. The team led by designers Sean Clark and Mike Stemmle was a rare exception, committed to keeping the eccentric spirit of *Monkey Island* alive.

Of the eleven games that LucasArts released in 2000, ten were related to *Star Wars*. The odd one out was *Escape From Monkey Island* (*EFMI*), the fourth instalment in the quirky graphic adventure series about the endearingly delusional Guybrush Threepwood, a self-proclaimed 'mighty pirate'. "Mike and I had both found ourselves between projects," says Sean. "We had a long history of working together and really good collaboration. We started kicking ideas around. We were thinking of anything other than a graphic adventure because the culture and attitude of the management team, as we read it, was less and less interested in the history of Lucas and storytelling. It had moved towards the 'shiny 3D objects and blowing stuff up' games."

Before the focus shifted towards explosive *Star Wars* action, LucasArts had long specialised in producing funny and characterful graphic adventures. Sean and Mike felt that original concepts had been sidelined in pursuit of greater commercial success. They pitched several ideas more in keeping with the company's new direction only to discover that their bosses actually wanted to bring back *Monkey Island*.

As fans of the series who hadn't had much direct involvement in the earlier games, the co-designers eagerly seized this unexpected opportunity. "*Monkey Island* was the crown jewel of the genuinely original adventure properties. It was always exciting, and an honour, to get to play with them for a while and hopefully not shatter them," says a self-deprecating Mike.

The third game, *The Curse Of Monkey Island*, had ended with Guybrush becoming engaged to Elaine Marley, his perennial love interest. Hence, the first task that Sean and Mike faced was working out where the story could go from there and how to accommodate these new character dynamics. "We had to scratch our heads a bit," recalls Sean. "We

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

MANIAC MANSION
PLATFORM: COMMODORE 64, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1987

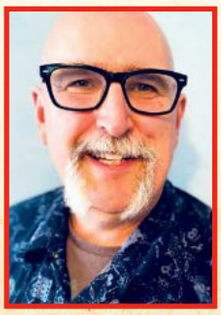
SAM & MAX HIT THE ROAD (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASED: 1993

GRIM FANDANGO
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASED: 1998

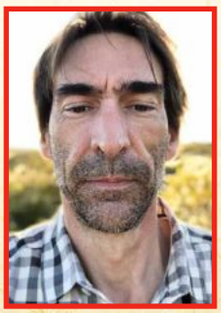
» [PlayStation 2] Guybrush ostentatiously celebrates beating Jojo Jr at Monkey Kombat to claim his ceremonial hat.

"MONKEY ISLAND WAS THE CROWN JEWEL OF THE GENUINELY ORIGINAL ADVENTURE PROPERTIES"
MIKE STEMMLE

could have told a story in a different part of the timeline and just ignored all of that. What we hit on right away was, it's actually kind of fun now that Guybrush really does think he's a man and a pirate. It's just inflated his ego even more. He feels validated, so we riffed on that. We didn't really want to do a buddy game with Guybrush and Elaine always together so we had to come up with an excuse for him to go off and do something."



» The game's co-designer, Mike Stemmle, is now a producer at AVRwell, which develops VR and AR rehabilitation activities for clinics and research facilities.



» One of *EFMI*'s two co-designers, Sean Clark has started a new company with a former LucasArts colleague while also developing his own projects.

The solution they found was Guybrush and Elaine returning from their honeymoon to discover that everything had changed. Mêlée Island is under threat from greedy Australian property tycoon Ozzie Mandrill and the mysterious Charles L Charles, who turns out to be LeChuck, the series' primary villain, in disguise. Having been ousted as governor, Elaine campaigns for re-election while Guybrush gathers up his reluctant crew and sets sail for legal help on Lucre Island.

Player expectations were changing drastically. Sean and Mike felt the pressure to move with the times or risk being left behind. "People were looking at the older graphic adventure games as primitive and out of date because they were 2D. They were beautiful games but that was the attitude," explains Sean. "You needed to do something modern. There was that commercial tension around the value of 3D and could we sell a game that didn't have it?"

They took the plunge. Shifting to 3D would immediately distinguish *EFMI* from the previous three games. A new engine was constructed on the fly to make that possible, adding to the uncertainty. "We were building the bridge as we were going across it," says Mike.

Recreating famous locations like the Scumm Bar or the Governor's Mansion in 3D, while abiding by *Monkey Island*'s trademark jaunty, angular aesthetic, took serious effort. A talented art team, led by Chris Miles,

MONKEY MAGIC

GUYBRUSH HAS EMBARKED ON SIX SWASHBUCKLING ADVENTURES SO FAR

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND

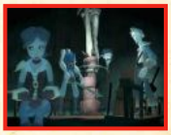
■ Released in 1990, the original game sees Guybrush encounter a colourful array of characters, including Elaine, LeChuck, Carla, Otis and Meathook, for the first time. Critically acclaimed, it earned a cult following and set a uniquely offbeat tone for the series.

MONKEY ISLAND 2: LECHUCK'S REVENGE

■ Guybrush confronts a zombie LeChuck while hunting for the legendary treasure of Big Whoop, which is revealed to be an amusement park in a surprising twist. The second outing let players explore with more freedom and choose between two difficulty settings.

THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

■ Led by Larry Ahern and Jonathan Ackley after Ron Gilbert's departure, the final LucasArts game to use the fabled SCUMM engine incorporated some major changes in presentation style, with cartoon graphics, fully animated cutscenes, voice acting and a musical score.



TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND

■ The fifth *Monkey Island* title was developed by Telltale Games for the PC and the Nintendo Wii. Five separate chapters were released across several months, telling the story of Guybrush's attempt to stop the spread of a voodoo pox and once more defeat LeChuck.

RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND

■ In 2022, 30 years on from leaving LucasArts, Ron Gilbert made a triumphant return to the series he created. Developed by his own company, Terrible Toybox, *Return To Monkey Island* used a bold picture-book art style and picked up where the second game left off.

You're the ugliest creature I've ever seen in my life.
My forearms have been mistaken for tree trunks!
I've out-wrestled octopi with these arms!
Do I see quivers of agony dance on your lip?

» [PlayStation 2] Guybrush takes on Ignatius Cheese, the owner of the Scumm Bar, in insult arm-wrestling.

FAR FROM A FARCE

A SURPRISE INTERVENTION SAVED EFMI'S PS2 PORT

■ "That game was too big to fit on a normal CD for the PlayStation 2, so we had to master it on a DVD. We were trying to make internal versions for testing, but we were just making coaster after coaster. We thought we were dead in the water," says Sean Clark. "We ended up having to contact PlayStation Japan and talk to a technical guy over there to walk us through it. He didn't speak English but it turned out we had a guy working in localisation, called Bryan Davis, who spoke Japanese.

Bryan turned out to be pivotal when porting the game. "We got Bryan on the phone, early in the morning, so we could line up with Japanese time. He was translating to us, then translating that into engineering speak and back to Japanese. It was brilliant," continues Sean.

"We had this conversation going back and forth where no one in that chain fully understood what was happening, but the two end points somehow managed to figure it out. Then we made our first DVD and it worked, which was amazing. Bryan's my hero! That was part of the culture of LucasArts. There were a lot of people who had different skill sets and interests and they were always happy to help."

» [PlayStation 2] Guybrush encounters a future version of himself in the Mystes O' Tyme Marshe puzzle.

▶ embraced the challenge. Environments were designed and then pre-rendered so that greater detail could be included without putting too much strain on limited systems.

A strict polygon count couldn't be exceeded, which led to certain compromises and creative solutions. "Computers were still slow. There was a certain level of fidelity that we wanted in these 3D characters, but, between that and the textures, we couldn't have more than a few on the screen at a time, which was annoying," says Mike.

"We could occasionally do some tricks to try to increase that number for certain scenes, but you can tell. Some of those town scenes are very empty. That was frustrating. There were times where we wanted more people than we could have, but we dealt with it.

"By the time we got to the third big island (Jambalaya), we realised what our limitations were. We could redesign how we wanted the art to look so we wouldn't have too many zoomed-out shots. It became a more intimate game as it went on."

Despite occasional niggles, the shift to 3D presented new opportunities for the team. "When you plant the camera, everything's fixed and you've just got finger-puppet theatre," says Sean. "Moving the camera freed us up creatively. You could use it to tell the story like you'd do in film. If you didn't really like a camera angle, you could just move it, re-render it and you were good to go. You could iterate on a shot rather than being stuck. That was really exciting."

Point-and-click controls were another central feature of the *Monkey Island* experience until *EFMI* came along. Inspired by the success of *Grim Fandango*, players now controlled Guybrush with the keyboard rather than the mouse. It was an experiment that caused some frustration, but also helped the development team with porting the game to the PlayStation 2.

Satire and self-awareness have always been defining features of the *Monkey Island* series and *EFMI* was no different in this respect. Throughout the story, Sean and Mike playfully mocked corporate culture, commercialisation and the very idea of unnecessary sequels. This theme came into its own when Guybrush visited Jambalaya Island in search of the Ultimate Insult.

"The other big pillar was this idea of gentrification – pirate lore becoming postcards. That resonated with, and tied back to, the end of *Monkey Island 2* with the whole amusement park bit," says Sean. "It felt like there was another shell of a world out there that wasn't just pirates and grog. It had this

> "PEOPLE WERE LOOKING AT THE OLDER GRAPHIC ADVENTURE GAMES AS PRIMITIVE AND OUT OF DATE BECAUSE THEY WERE 2D"
> SEAN CLARK

» [PC] Searching underwater for the entrance to Pegnose Pete's booty showcase.

» [PlayStation 2] Travelling between locations on a map of Mêlée Island, where the game's story begins.

» [PlayStation 2] An impressive overview of Lucre Island showing the harbour and the main town.

farcical sense of itself. Then, when we started making puns like StarBuccaneers and Planet Threepwood, we sort of lost our minds!"

EFMI had lots of clever, silly and well-designed puzzles, but problems arose with the introduction of Monkey Kombat, an idea that dominated the game's final stages. A more abstract version of insult sword-fighting, it was unpopular with many players because these battles lacked the humorous wordplay they'd come to expect. "I've spent a lot of time apologising for Monkey Kombat over the years," says Mike. "Back in the day, with some of the puzzles, I was way too impressed with my own cleverness at times. I realised just recently how it could have been so much better. If I had just made some kind of monkey translation device then you could have had some really cool monkey fighting jokes that would have made it actually funny instead of a grind."

The final battle is between a giant monkey robot and a statue of LeChuck controlled by Ozzie Mandrill. "I came up with the idea that a tie would somehow lead you to the ultimate victory, which was a good enough idea in itself, but I didn't do a great job of conveying that. Even when it happens, we don't explain why it worked," admits Mike.

Sean recognises Mike's concerns about Monkey Kombat but doesn't share his sense of regret. "I'm in two minds on it. At that time, we believed that we were the last graphic adventure, and *Monkey Island* game, that Lucas would ever make so we felt like we really had to pay off on the monkey head. We can go a little scorched earth with the lore because there's nothing behind us.

"We loved the idea that the monkey head was actually the top of a giant monkey robot. Everyone on the team was giggling a lot and thought it was hilarious. It sort of gained its own momentum. I don't apologise for it the same way that Mike does. I think it was fun and there are some really great gags in there but it's probably the part of the game that feels least like *Monkey Island*. It feels more like a Japanese cartoon."

The absurdity of the game was often mirrored by events in the office. As the finish line came into view, the team started planning how they would celebrate, which culminated in them hiring one of the tall ships down on San Francisco Bay. "I walked into one of the programming offices and Ryan Danz (scripter) was on the phone with somebody asking what it cost to rent monkeys for our party! 'Well how many monkeys can I get?' That was kind of what that project was like for the entire time," says Sean. "You never really knew what was going to happen next."

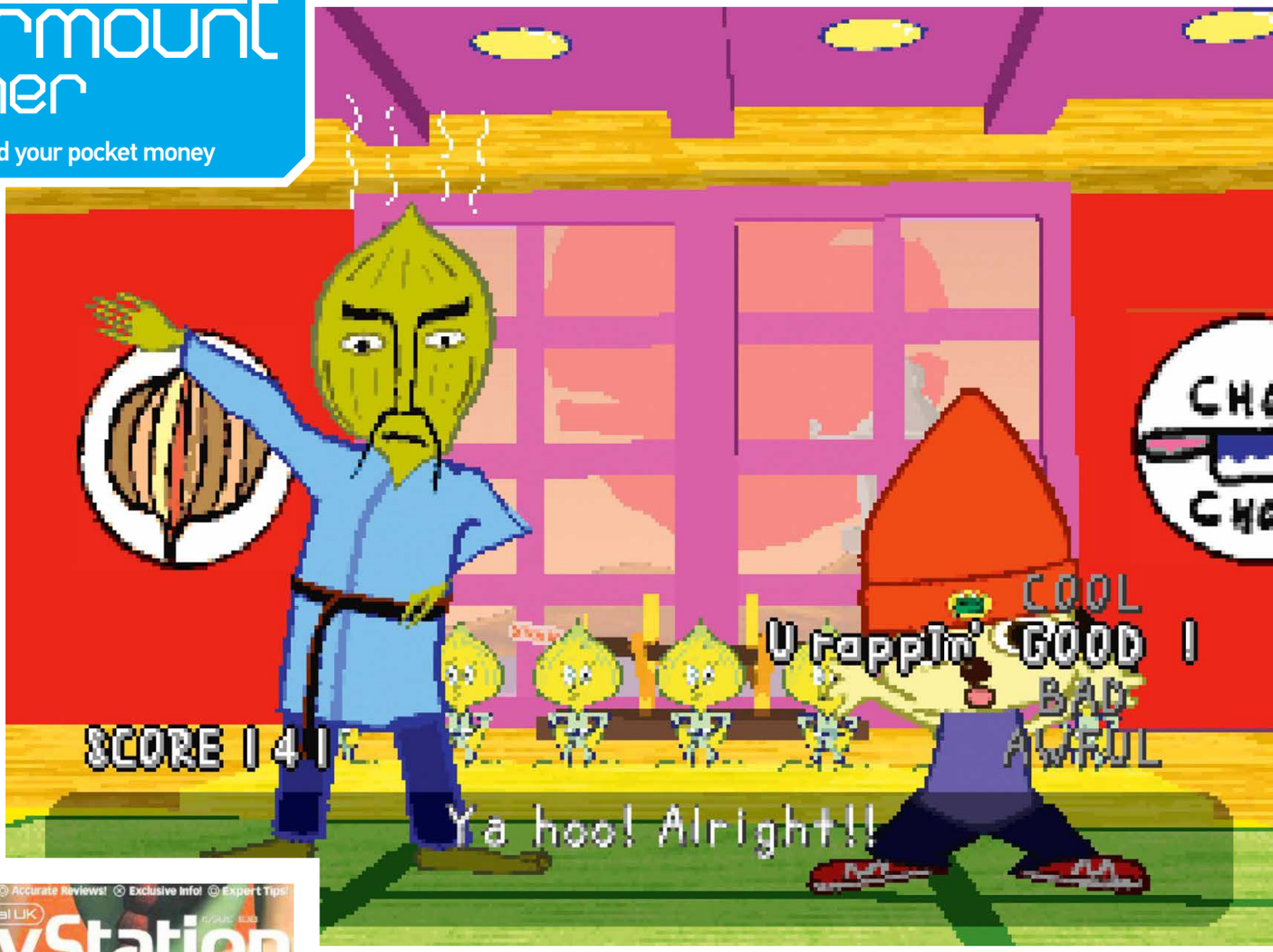
EFMI sold well and received positive reviews upon its release. It was broadly perceived as a bold step forward using the technology that was available, which, in retrospect, has dated the 3D graphics to a very specific time period. As with any significant overhaul of a beloved series, there was some criticism, but the designers knew that would be the case. "Mike and I used to joke that the most recent *Monkey Island* game will always be the least favourite, so you have to wait for the one to follow!" laughs Sean.

"BACK IN THE DAY, WITH SOME OF THE PUZZLES, I WAS WAY TOO IMPRESSED WITH MY OWN CLEVERNESS AT TIMES"
MIKE STEMMLE

Mike delivers his own verdict with characteristic modesty. "There's a lot of content in there, some of it actually funny, and a lot of well-designed puzzles to offset the ones that are a bit more questionable. The work that the team put in – the artists and animators and our poor benighted scripters – to slap this all together was amazing," he says. "It's the red-headed stepchild of the series. It's nobody's favourite, but it's getting a better and closer look now that it's a couple of decades on." ✱

» [PlayStation 2] A cutscene showing Elaine Marley, LeChuck and Ozzie Mandrill in the Governor's Mansion.

» [PlayStation 2] The final battle between a giant monkey robot and an equally large statue of LeChuck.



» [PlayStation] *Parrapa*'s animation really brings the 2D characters to life.

OFFICIAL UK PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE #108

LIKE CONSOLES, MAGAZINES SADLY DON'T LAST FOR EVER, AND IN 2004 THE LAST ISSUE OF THE OFFICIAL UK PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE WAS PUBLISHED. THERE WAS PLENTY TO LOOK BACK ON FONDLY THOUGH, AND MUCH OF IT COULD BE FOUND ON A JAM-PACKED COVERDISC FILLED WITH MUSIC, MULTIPLAYER AND HOMEBREW MADNESS

WORDS BY JAMES KONIK

THIS MONTH IN MARCH 2004

Official UK PlayStation Magazine had lasted for 108 issues, but by March 2004 the games had finally dried up. Recent issues had been themed celebrations of things past. The grand finale had just two reviews, and a cut-out funeral, but was full of content celebrating the mag and the PlayStation. The console had succeeded spectacularly. As the curtain fell, the PS2 was dominating. The celebratory feel extended to the disc, full of music and party games. *Music 2000* and the Yaroze collection were a testament to Sony's creativity. And what could be a better send-off than *PaRappa*?

» [PlayStation] *Blitter Boy* is full of slick visual effects, and cool weapons, like this Rainbow Death gun.

THE MAIN EVENT: PARAPPA THE RAPPER DEMO

It wasn't too late to define a genre in 1996, and PaRappa had burst onto the scene, turning heads with his wholesome brand of hip-hop and papercraft visuals. Rhythm action soon exploded, and a wave of music games followed, many finding their way onto this disc.

The demo features the first step on your rapping journey, facing off against Chop Chop Master Onion in the Fruites Dojo as he challenges you to prove your skills, and win the heart of floral love interest Sunny Funny.

Putting 2D characters into 3D worlds, Rodney Greenblat's effervescent art and the gloriously silly nature of the characters gives the game a unique aesthetic. It still feels fresh today.

» [PlayStation] If there's a cooler protagonist in gaming, we don't know who it is.

» [PlayStation] *Total Soccer* plays like *Kick Off* with better ball control and a slightly more, er, sensible view of the pitch.

Gameplay is simple. You hit increasingly complex button combos in time to the music, but mess up too often and the song will come to a swift end. It's incredibly fun, silly and just challenging enough to keep you hooked.

You're not just rapping though, you're punching, kicking, jumping and turning, so your button bashing feeds into the game's visual dynamic along with its soundscape.

The concept wouldn't have worked without the songs, and designer Masaya Matsuura's background in the Japanese music scene paid off. The brilliantly upbeat tunes perfectly complement the art.

Parappa himself is the humblest of rappers. The loveable canine underdog appeals to everyone without quite making things too twee. "I gotta believe!" he says, and everybody did.

Few games showcase Sony's ability to combine innovation with fun like *Parappa*. It's a mad idea that could easily have fallen short, but developer NanaOn-Sha nailed it on the first attempt. Memorable and quotable, you'll never forget the songs, or the game.

PLAY THIS NEXT: NET YAROZE COLLECTION

The final disc included a set of 20 games made with Sony's Net Yaroze homebrew system. The standard is remarkably high, with excellent takes on everything from *Arkanoid* and *Space Invaders* to *Galaxians*, *Robotron* and *Sokoban*. They're all represented and all show oodles of creativity. The highlights include Chris Chadwick's excellent shooter *Blitter Boy*, with its rainbow and fruit weapons. Then there's multiplayer *Thrust*-a-like *Gravitation*, with physics-based racing and shooting, and there's Charles Chapman's impressive *Yaroze Total Soccer*, which plays like a more controllable *Kick Off*. It's a fantastic library booster, keeping the grass roots spirit well and truly alive. ✱

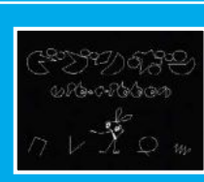
Covermount HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST OF THE REST

MUSIC 2000 DEMO

■ Sony pushed its console hard in the club scene and titles like this helped it appeal to a broader audience. A genuinely powerful little sequencer, it's easy to build music tracks using the palette of available samples, and you can add video too.

VIB RIBBON DEMO



■ Not content with *PaRappa*, developer NanaOn-Sha managed to think even more outside the box with this miniature gem. You're a line-drawn rabbit dodging hazards to music in a game of upbeat geometric lunacy. *Vib Ribbon* is its own vibe.

ARCHER MACLEAN'S 3D POOL DEMO

■ This great release from the late Archer Maclean is a perfect rendition of the game, even without a mouse. Slyly injected with humour and personality, the demo gives you a not quite long enough three minutes to sink as many balls as possible.

DANCING STAGE FEVER DEMO

■ Konami's fabulously groovy *Dancing Stage Fever* was the latest in the pioneering dancing game series. It's designed for a dance mat, but quite fun to play without one. You get two tracks and a selection of characters in the demo.

ANNA KOURNIKOVA'S SMASH COURT TENNIS DEMO

■ This solid, licensed entry in Namco's arcade tennis series plays a good game, and the demo gives you a three-game match for one or two players. The full game includes unlockable characters from Namco games, like *Tekken* and *Ridge Racer*.

MS PAC-MAN MAZE MADNESS DEMO

■ A short demo of a delightfully mad, but inventive 2.5D game, that does a great job of using its theme. Loading bars are Pac-themed and the wakka-wakka speaking Professor Pac is on-hand to help you defeat witch Mesmerelda. Leaves you wanting more.

CRASH BASH DEMO

■ What better way to see off the final issue than a *Crash Bandicoot* party game? There's the tactical Pogo Painter, and Polar Panic, where you knock rivals out of the arena. An anarchic taste of the 28 games in the full package.

BOMBERMAN WORLD DEMO

■ *3D Bomberman World* let you blow your friends up on the PlayStation, with up to five people via a Multitap. It looked slick, and it's great fun in multiplayer, though the angled perspective makes the action hard to read.

THE HISTORY OF

FORBIDDEN SIREN

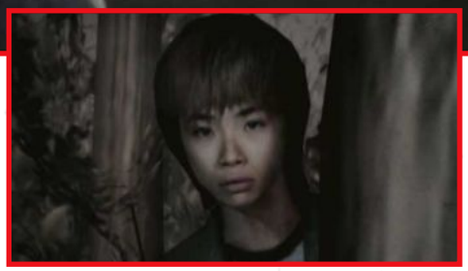
サイレン

HORROR'S POPULARITY IN VIDEOGAMES REACHED NEW HEIGHTS ON THE PLAYSTATION 2 WITH THE POWER TO CREATE MORE CINEMATIC AND ATMOSPHERIC SCARES. WE SPEAK WITH KEIICHIRO TOYAMA, A PIONEER IN THE GENRE WHO IN THIS ERA CREATED THE CULT SERIES THAT WAS GROUND-BREAKING AS IT WAS DIVISIVE

WORDS BY ALAN WEN

Keiichiro Toyama, director and writer of all three games in the *Forbidden Siren* series, now CEO of Bokeh Game Studio.

» [PlayStation 2] Shibito won't just shuffle after you like a zombie, they're deadlier when armed. [This one looks safe – Ed]



» [PlayStation 2] Kyoya is *Forbidden Siren*'s first playable character, an outsider who stumbles upon Hanuda's mysterious ceremony.

When it comes to survival horror, two series names are likely to come up immediately: *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*. Whether *Forbidden Siren* (or just *Siren* as it is known internationally) would take the third spot is debatable, as it's arguably the definition of cult, a series that's both unusual and limiting in its appeal. Yet the series' creator Keiichiro Toyama seems happiest to talk about it more than as the director of *Silent Hill*, which would have been the more popular choice. "*Siren* is the most memorable game for me," he says.

Conversely, though it was *Silent Hill* that earned him the reputation of a horror game developer, Toyama has less fond memories of its development, where the team and the project had been all but written off by Konami's management. "The PlayStation 1 era was a big change with longer development times than before," he recalls. "*Silent Hill* was the first project I directed in that era and it was very stressful managing the team during that time. So after *Silent Hill*, I lost some motivation to lead the team."

> "THE IDEA OF MULTIPLE PLAYABLE CHARACTERS WAS SOMETHING I PLANNED FROM THE BEGINNING"
> KEIICHIRO TOYAMA

Indeed, despite *Silent Hill*'s commercial success, Toyama left Konami soon after and joined Sony's Japan Studio, where he wasn't even thinking about horror. In fact, the first game he worked on at the studio was as a gameplay designer for *Yoake no Mariko*, a voice-controlled rhythm game only released in Japan. It was nonetheless an interesting time for PlayStation's Japanese division, not so much a company so much as it was operating like Sony Music, as Toyama describes it, where "game creators were seen like artists or a band". This was at a time when Sony wasn't just nurturing external developers but establishing in-house teams that led to new original games like *Ape Escape* and *Ico*. In other words, Toyama didn't join the company because it wanted him to make another horror game, in the same way that Konami had ordered his team to make a competitor to *Resident Evil*.

Nonetheless, new ideas were bubbling while developing *Yoake no Mariko*, which included a new horror game. Rather than trying to imitate the sensationalism of *Resident Evil*, the inspirations for what would become *Forbidden Siren* had come from more unexpected sources. Given the setting of isolated Japanese rural town Hanuda, where a sudden disaster afflicts the community with a condition that transforms many of them into hostile zombie-like Shibito, you might assume it was riding the rising popularity of J-horror, as also seen in *Project Zero* in 2001. Toyama however cites Western writers, including Stephen King, whose influence he hadn't felt had been translated to games (at least before Remedy did it years later with *Alan Wake*), though in this case, a major inspiration was HP Lovecraft.

Specifically, it was the cult author's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* that was adapted into a Japanese TV drama series in the early Nineties that had come to Toyama's attention. "This drama was set in a contemporary countryside village, so it was an inspiration," he explains. Other influences came from books he was reading at the time, such as horror novel ▶

SILENT SHOUTS

TOYAMA'S INFLUENTIAL BACKLOG, AND THE ONES YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT

Although *Siren* is the only series Toyama has worked on multiple entries of, he is of course better known for being the director of the original *Silent Hill*. While it might have been made as a rival to *Resident Evil*, its atmosphere and focus on psychological horror has made it a popular and influential series decades on.

Prior to *Silent Hill* however, he was actually specialising in graphic and character design, having worked on a variety of Konami titles including the Mega-CD version of Hideo Kojima's *Snatcher*, as well as the PlayStation version of Japan-exclusive *Tokimeki Memorial*, a high-school dating sim with social elements influencing modern RPGs like *Persona* and *Fire Emblem*.

It's also notable that after the *Siren* series, Toyama pivoted away from horror to make *Gravity Rush*, an innovative 3D action adventure where you traverse by shifting the direction of gravity to fall towards, which he had actually conceived even before making *Silent Hill*. Although first released on the Vita, which made use of the handheld's gyroscopic controls, a more definitive and polished HD remaster came to PS4, followed by a more expansive sequel, which would also be Toyama's final game at Sony's now defunct Japan Studio.

» [PlayStation] Toyama only worked on the first *Silent Hill* but it stands alongside *Resident Evil* as the most popular and enduring series in survival horror.

» [PlayStation 2] Hisako is one of the first friendly faces in Hanuda who teaches you sightjacking.

Shiki by Fuyumi Ono, which is also set in a small Japanese village suddenly afflicted with mysterious deaths of people who come back to life as vampires, as well as *Battle Royale* by Koushun Takami. "Both books have a lot of characters. So I started thinking of describing this whole village of people, and so the idea of multiple playable characters was something I planned from the beginning."

Horror games have had multiple characters before, such as in *Resident Evil*, but there had never been a game with such a large ensemble as *Forbidden Siren*'s ten playable survivors, each coming from a different background, from PE teacher Reiko Takato to old hunter Akira Shimura, as well as outsiders like student Kyoya Suda. In fact, the original *Resident Evil* had been envisioned to have a group of playable characters much like the Famicom game *Sweet Home* it had been inspired by, but the PlayStation's technical limitations made this impossible, so a game like *Forbidden Siren* felt like something that could only be possible on the PS2.

Bringing these characters to life also made use of photographing real actors' faces and then superimposing them onto the character models rather than making 3D polygon face models. The technology had evidently come a long way since actors' likenesses were digitised onto the cast of *GoldenEye*, though it's funny to know that it was Rare's follow-up *Perfect Dark* that had influenced Toyama to try and do something similar but smoother on the PS2. "I did think it was creepy that *Perfect Dark* used photos of human faces, so the characters in *Forbidden Siren* are also meant to be creepy!" A similar approach was taken with environments where the team went to photograph real abandoned villages across Japan, which were used directly in modelling Hanuda's dilapidated buildings and eerie

INVENTIVE HORROR

OTHER UNORTHODOX PS2 HORROR TAKES

PROJECT ZERO

If walking at a snail's pace inside a haunted house with malevolent ghosts wasn't already nail-biting, your only weapon is a camera, which is only truly effective when you let a wraith give you a close-up. The only entry on this list to become a long-running series.

GREGORY HORROR SHOW

A rather left-field and more kid-friendly horror from Capcom based on a Japanese CGI anime show set in a mysterious hotel run by a mouse. Your blocky child protagonist is tasked with spying on the hotel's unusual guests in order to steal their bottled souls.

KUON

Set in Japan's Heian period, you play as three characters exploring Fujiwara Manor during an outbreak of monsters, which you can fight against with traditional Japanese weapons like a fan or naginata. It's however better known for its atmosphere than being actually enjoyable to play.

» [PlayStation 2] Professor Tamon Takeuchi looks pretty cool, even though he's often stuck escorting his student Yoriko.

» [PlayStation 2] Hanuda's religious cult is inspired by Japan's hidden Christians, hence the design of Kei's outfit.

streets. It really gave the illusion that you were playing inside a live-action film.

The Shibito were also not your average zombie, which was beginning to get stale in this generation. Preceding *Resident Evil 4*'s Ganados, Hanuda's afflicted inhabitants were more sentient. Toyama describes the Shibito as "intelligent creatures, not like brainless zombies, but also not as intelligent as humans. I was actually thinking of *I Am Legend*, the original book by Richard Matheson". Besides being able to detect your presence, some can even wield weapons including sniper rifles, even if they're not necessarily super accurate. They also can't be killed, getting back up if you manage to attack them, assuming your character is able to get hold of a weapon.

Instead, there's a greater focus on avoiding combat altogether through stealth. That idea had actually come from *Metal Gear Solid* from Toyama's former employer Konami. "[*Metal Gear Solid*] had intelligent enemies looking for you, they had interesting AI. So I thought that would be a good fit in horror too." Admittedly, the stealth mechanics in *Forbidden Siren* are a lot more basic, while the crouch animation itself is also awkwardly slow. Indeed, a lot of the gameplay can feel rudimentary, with many interactions requiring bringing up a menu first. What it does do that stands out is Sightjacking.

> "FORBIDDEN SIREN WAS A VERY EXPERIMENTAL GAME FOR ME, BUT SONY HAD A GOOD CULTURE AS A PLATFORM HOLDER"
>
> KEIICHIRO TOYAMA

Although your playable survivors aren't affected by the titular Siren that can be heard after the freak disaster, the aftereffects somehow enable them to jump into the heads of enemies (and allies) to see through their eyes. There's an unusual tactility to having to turn the left analog stick, just like tuning a radio or old TV set, until the static clears and you can see where the Shibito is looking, which becomes your way to figure out how to avoid being detected when you're trying to sneak past.

Intriguingly, the idea for Sightjacking came to Toyama through an entirely different kind of game that wasn't even released in Japan. "I played a submarine sim game on the Mega Drive called *688 Attack Sub*, where the player has a sonar to help them guess where the enemy is," he explains. "I thought it would be interesting for players to see what the enemy sees."

» [PlayStation 2] While you can attack Shibito, they'll get back up soon after taking a few hits.

Forbidden Siren was very divisive, mostly owing to many people not even understanding its quirks, in particular how the narrative didn't follow a chronological order, while it transpires some missions have to be repeated but there would be a more obscure objective required in order to progress and unlock more of the story.

Making so many playable characters, where some missions might be over in a matter of minutes before cutting to another character's perspective, was certainly a challenge Toyama was conscious of. But that was also the benefit of being at Sony where these creative risks could be taken. "*Forbidden Siren* was a very experimental game for me, but Sony had a good culture as a platform holder," he says. "The company wasn't just focussed on revenue but spreading the PlayStation to a wide audience by creating brand-new titles people hadn't played."

Despite not being a critical or commercial success when it launched in 2003 in Japan and 2004 in the West (it did however get a respectable 32/40 in *Famitsu*), Toyama had the greenlight to make a sequel, as the team took feedback to the first game and did attempt ▶

OBSCURE

■ If *The Faculty* was a game, this survival horror is set over the course of one night in an American high school as you play as five students, each with their own unique skills. Its two-player co-op mode was a novel feature, letting you try and survive with a friend. A sequel followed in 2007.

HAUNTING GROUND

■ A spiritual successor to *Clock Tower* where you play a young woman trying to escape a castle. It's a horror leaning heavily on your vulnerability where you can easily get exhausted, but you do have help in the form of a White Shepherd called Hewie. Good boy!

RULE OF ROSE

■ Comparable to *Haunting Ground* as your protagonist also has a canine companion, except she's taken captive on an airship where she endures cruel punishment rituals from a secret society of children. Yet the themes and content led to the game's UK release being pulled.

HONG KONG HORROR

THE SPIRIT OF SIREN LIVES ON IN SLITTERHEAD

Following his departure from Sony in 2020, Toyama founded Bokeh Game Studio alongside fellow *Siren* colleagues Kazunobu Sato and Junya Okura, and its first game *Slitterhead* released in 2024. It's a return to horror, albeit with more of an action and combat focus as you seek out and defeat the titular grotesque monsters that have taken control of unsuspecting members of the public. But you can also see some of *Siren*'s DNA in there.

"*Slitterhead* is like a reimagining of the concept of *Siren*, so I expected *Siren* fans would be interested," Toyama admits. This is once again a story involving an ensemble cast of characters, whose fates overlap, with missions that also form a fragmented narrative stuck in a time loop. Early on, there's even a sequence that's an explicit nod to Sightjacking, although your spirit protagonist can fully posses other human characters.

The aesthetics however are a deliberate contrast. "Where *Siren* is set in the countryside, *Slitterhead* is set in the city of Hong Kong, with more colour," Toyama explains, having cited the films of Wong Kar-wai and Fruit Chan as influences. The character designs were meanwhile inspired by manga targeting adults. "I love that they are also more violent and bloody. Not many games are influenced by this kind of manga, so it's why I wanted that style over something photorealistic."

» [PC] *Slitterhead*'s reception was mixed, its narrative progression throwing players for a loop as much as *Forbidden Siren*'s had.

» [PlayStation 2] *Forbidden Siren 2* is just as creepy as its predecessor and offers tweaked gameplay mechanics as well.

» [PlayStation 2] Even today, the face-capture techniques makes the cutscenes look eerily like watching a live-action movie.

to appeal to more of a mass audience. "Players, especially in the US, didn't like the stealthy gameplay all the time and preferred combat, so I did try to add more action moments," he says, perhaps with irony given that *Forbidden Siren 2* was ultimately considered too niche for a US release.

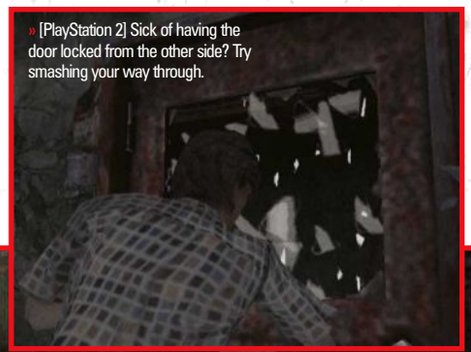
> "THE IDEA OF SIREN CAME PURELY FROM ME – THAT'S WHY IT'S MY LEGACY"
> KEIICHIRO TOYAMA

More fundamentally, the sequel just benefitted from a better onboarding process early on, as well as the option to select an easy difficulty from the off. It also just felt smoother to play, with characters able to perform more actions without having to use a menu every time, while crouching-walking also felt a little bit faster. Fans of Japanese games could even get a more authentic experience by having the option to play with Japanese language audio in this game rather than the English dub with its comically inconsistent accents.

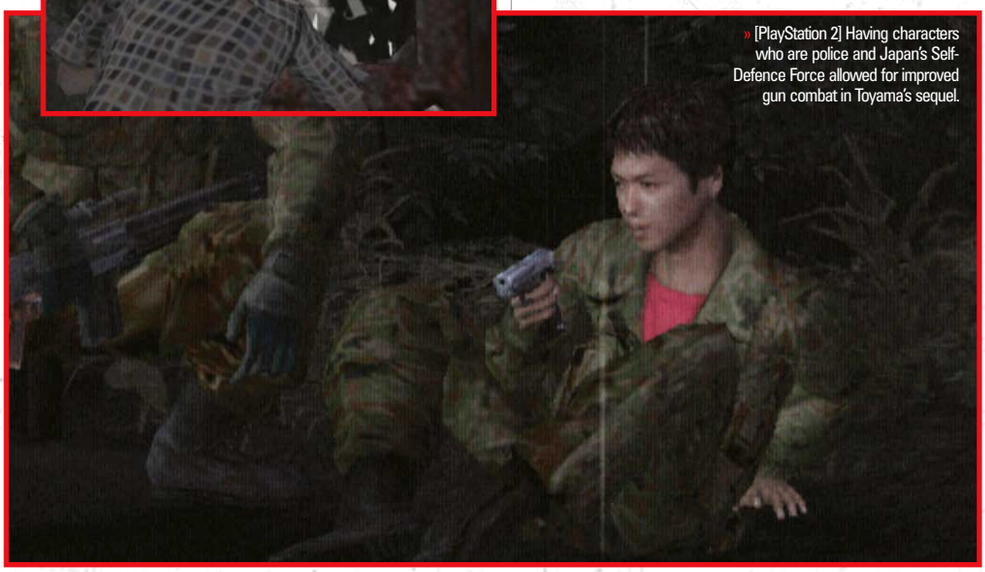
Yet despite trying to make *Forbidden Siren 2* "more understandable", Toyama admits wryly, "It ended up being a more complicated game!" In fairness, this did mean a more interesting variety of mechanics, such as characters who could make use of more firearms, which would also auto-aim, a flashlight that didn't just illuminate environments but could be used to repel certain enemies. You could even use Sightjacking as a form of mind-control on other characters, while you could automatically Sightjack the nearest enemy instead of manually searching for a signal, and even assign it to one of the face buttons so you didn't have to search for it again.

The sequel's overall reception wasn't exactly an improvement then but still evidently had its fans or other ways of reaching out to audiences through other means, which included a manga series and even a Japanese movie adaptation based on *Forbidden Siren 2* that coincided with the game's release in 2006, though in retrospect Toyama says the latter wasn't very good. What people might not know is that there had also been another movie adaptation in the works over in Hollywood. That same year, Sam Raimi's production company had purchased the movie rights to *Siren*, but ultimately nothing came of it, at least on the big screen. But it was this planned adaptation that influenced the final game in the series, *Siren: Blood Curse*, which had been intended to coincide with the film's release.

A reimagining of the first game for the PS3, it's a conscious nod to the trend of Hollywood remaking Japanese horror films like *The Ring* and *The Grudge*, with a Western cast, albeit still set in the Japanese village of Hanuda and with still a few playable native Japanese



» [PlayStation 2] Sick of having the door locked from the other side? Try smashing your way through.



» [PlayStation 2] Having characters who are police and Japan's Self-Defence Force allowed for improved gun combat in Toyama's sequel.

» [PlayStation 3] While still having a playable ensemble, *Siren: Blood Curse*'s main protagonist was American teenager Howard.

» [PlayStation 3] *Blood Curse* is about an American film crew investigating Hanuda, with Sol as the show's cameraman.

» [PlayStation 3] The HD era meant more photorealistic character models, and scarier looking Shibito.

characters. Toyama said that this was down to the cancelled film adaptation also having an American protagonist as its lead, though he also notes a change in the PS3 era. "There was more focus on global sales and revenue, and so Sony felt that the main character should be American," he laments. "Now Japanese samurai games are very popular, but at the time, playing as a Japanese character wasn't super welcoming."

A new platform in the HD era brought new opportunities, as *Blood Curse* was initially released in four downloadable instalments consisting of three episodes each via the PSN store (Toyama originally envisioned it as episodes dropping every week just like a TV show), while technological advancements meant it was now possible to achieve photorealistic faces in 3D modelling. Yet it arguably also lessened the charm of the series. By having a chronological episodic format, the complex yet unique narrative structure of previous games was jettisoned (even though the idea of split timelines still exists), while Toyama laments the loss of the original game's unique facial style. "The technology has evolved, but I think *Blood Curse*'s characters are kind of boring. The first *Siren* is still my favourite."

It would seem he had the last laugh. While the sequel and remake remain stuck on older platforms, *Forbidden Siren* got a new lease of life when it was rereleased digitally on the PS4 in 2016, before getting a PS5 rerelease in 2024, which meant you could now create save states and rewind gameplay (the latest version is however the US version across the board, evident when you see that it's just called *Siren* on the title screen).

With Japan Studio shuttering in 2021, Toyama still looks back at its early years with fondness, at a time "where I didn't have to think about revenue, and I could create what I really wanted to create. Also the idea of *Siren* came purely from me – that's why it's my legacy".

It's perhaps why, even if *Forbidden Siren* never gained more than a cult following, it's worth remembering and championing games like it, especially at a time when the games industry is more risk-averse than ever and even former Japan Studio alumnus Fumito Ueda has said that games are in an era no longer defined by ground-breaking mechanics. Not that this is going to stop Toyama from continuing to come up with weird ideas, whether or not they catch on.

"Indie games are still experimenting and creating games that have never been seen, so I don't worry about the future of experimental games," he concludes. "But even though we do have to think about revenue, at Bokeh Game Studios, we are still trying to make innovative games. It's the only style of game development I know." ✱

Parasite Eve II

I UNLOCKED THE GUNBLADE

» RETROREVIVAL

» **PLAYSTATION** » **2000** » **SQUARE**

I've not played *Parasite Eve.* Nor have I played *The 3rd Birthday*. I've not read the novel or seen the film, but I have played *Parasite Eve II* many, many times. It all started when I was reviewing games for the mag I worked on in Belfast – there was some sort of sponsorship deal with Woolworths, which meant I'd just turn up, pick four games and the cashier would hand them over. Very trusting, but it still kind of felt like I was stealing them.

I'd take the games home, play them and review them at work. The problem was that once the reviews were finished the editor would demand I hand over the games. He wasn't a gamer, and it annoyed me greatly having to let go of them. Especially when I discovered there was a Gunblade to unlock as one of the most powerful weapons in Aya's arsenal. As much as I tried, I just didn't get enough time to get it done.

I did finish *Parasite Eve II* for the review, but it irked me that I hadn't completed it. So jump from the year 2000 to 2005 when I found it for cheap, and I played the shit out of it. Over and over again until I had enough points to unlock the Gunblade. At this point I was working on *Cube* magazine, and for some reason I was given my own column in the Directory section. So one issue I decided to write about it. Some sort of personal vindication? I don't know. (Heh, this now feels like a sequel to that column.) Anyway, in issue 46 of *Cube* there are three screenshots showing the Gunblade in action. I only hit about three enemies with it before deciding that I really didn't want to play *Parasite Eve II* ever again. I'd had enough, I can still remember most sections of the game. But, I'm immensely proud that I did it and have proof! ✱

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THE MAKING OF UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE

DEVELOPED DURING A TIME OF GREAT UPHEAVAL AT NAUGHTY DOG, UNCHARTED EMBRACED PHOTOREAL VISUALS AND PIONEERED CINEMATIC GAMEPLAY. DAN AREY, BOB RAFEI, CARLOS GONZALEZ-OCHOA AND JUDD SIMANTOV REMEMBER THE GROUND-BREAKING TITLE'S CREATION

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SONY
- **DEVELOPER:** NAUGHTY DOG
- **PLATFORM:** 2007
- **RELEASED:** PLAYSTATION 3
- **GENRE:** ACTION ADVENTURE

While some studios are renowned for reinventing franchises for each generation of consoles, others are better known for creating new IPs for new systems.

Naughty Dog fits the second category. Its *Crash Bandicoot* games helped to define the PlayStation, but instead of continuing the series on the PS2 it chose instead to grace the new console with fresh protagonists in the form of *Jak & Daxter*. Then when Sony looked to release the PS3, Naughty Dog retired the popular pair in favour of a new project. As well as new ideas, the studio required new tech and new hires to build it, as tools coder Carlos Gonzalez-Ochoa recalls. "When I got hired I was told Naughty Dog was making this big game; that was why it was called *Big*. I came from Disney, where there were server farms to render things. At Naughty Dog everything was on a PC and everybody was sharing files on Windows. That was good for PlayStation 2 games, because working on the PS2 was very down to the metal, but we were going to start making this big pipeline, and we were going to start building a lot of tooling."

One of the early beneficiaries of these new tools was art technical lead Judd Simantov, who joined Naughty Dog just as it was starting to develop content for *Big*. Judd explains the clear need for a technical approach while noting that it may have initially come at the expense of nailing down the project's core concept. "I was responsible for all of the character tech stuff in terms of how we built the characters, working with animation to make them move and a lot of other stuff. When we started there was a very small group of us. We were a Sony flagship company, so we needed to really push the hardware. But I would say that there was probably over-scoping early on in that we focussed a lot on trying to push technology without a clear view about what the game was."

As the project's art director Bob Rafei points out, the transition to PS3 development involved more than just technical challenges. Bob emphasises the impact of the system's ability to render photorealistic visuals when earlier consoles had been more suited to displaying cartoon like graphics, and he highlights the reorganisation of responsibilities at the studio. "Technically, everybody was struggling with the PS3's Cell architecture, and Naughty Dog wasn't an exception. Culturally, we were shifting from stylised visuals to photoreal, and there was some friction in terms of how over the top we could make the main character. Then from an administrative perspective, Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin had left the company. So a lot of the senior crew stepped up to fill that void, but who was in charge of what? Because there were multiple creative and art leads."

» [PlayStation 3] Minutes into *Uncharted* you realise that the world Nathan Drake lives in is a very dangerous one.

One of those leading efforts to give the project direction was Naughty Dog's creative director Dan Arey. Dan realised that the cinematic gameplay made possible by the PS3 suited his experience as a storyteller and worldbuilder, and he remembers researching a historical figure who could be woven into a fiction characterised by action and intrigue. "We had an amazing ▶

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

CRASH BANDICOOT (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION
RELEASED: 1996

JAK & DAXTER: THE PRECURSOR LEGACY
PLATFORM: PS2
RELEASED: 2001

THE LAST OF US
PLATFORM: PS3
RELEASED: 2013

"WE HAD AN AMAZING OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A NEW IP. WE REALISED WE COULD GO MUCH MORE PHOTOREAL, AND I HAD BEEN OBSESSING ABOUT TREASURE HUNTERS"
DAN AREY

■ Nerd Ninjas COO/ creative director Dan Arey co-created *Uncharted*'s narrative and contributed gameplay ideas.

■ *Uncharted* art director Bob Rafei is currently the CEO/creative director of Big Red Button Entertainment, Inc.

■ Judd Simantov was art technical lead on *Uncharted* and is a founder of the card game company Wanda Cards.

■ Carlos Gonzalez-Ochoa coded tools and water effects for *Uncharted,* and is now an AR/VR software engineer.

INTERESTING INSPIRATIONS

THE ECLECTIC INFLUENCES ON VARIOUS ASPECTS OF UNCHARTED

JAK & DAXTER

■ Naughty Dog's earlier project provided a template of sorts for aspects of *Uncharted*'s gameplay, albeit these took a more grounded approach. Where Jak double-jumps and performs superhuman martial arts moves, Nathan Drake scales sheer cliffs without ropes and engages in bare-knuckle melee combat.

INDIANA JONES

■ The whip-snapping hero was a major influence on *Uncharted*'s Nathan Drake. Not only did Naughty Dog take inspiration from Indy's wisecracking everyman persona, but it also channelled the man with the hat's treasure hunting in exotic locales and paid tribute to his fish-out-of-water story beats.

FIREFLY

■ The lead character in the TV series *Firefly* and the actor who played him were touchstones for Nathan Drake's creators. Captain Mal Reynold's cynicism, stoicism and deadpan delivery were so inspirational that the actor who brought him to life Nathan Fillion was approached to voice Nathan Drake.

GEARS OF WAR

■ The release of *Gears Of War* had a big impact on *Uncharted*. Until then, its third-person shooting had auto aim instead of free aiming. An equally crucial inspiration came from *Gears Of War*'s cover mechanics, which led to *Uncharted* adopting a similar cover system in place of open-space firefights.

» [PlayStation 3] Man-made spaces that have been reclaimed by nature are one of *Uncharted*'s prominent themes.

opportunity to create a new IP with the next PlayStation. We realised we could go much more photoreal, and I had been obsessing about treasure hunters. I did a lot of research on Sir Francis Drake. He was buried at sea in a lead coffin in the Caribbean, so I asked myself what if he was on a quest for the golden city of El Dorado, and what if it wasn't a city, what if it was a golden sarcophagus?"

As well as informing the backstory for the game that would become *Uncharted*, Sir Francis Drake also lent his surname to its player character. A pair of live-action protagonists helped to define Nathan Drake, and Dan cites one's preoccupation with ancient artefacts and the flawed but relatable nature of both being particular inspirations for him. "Evan Wells and I wanted to make an Indiana Jones game. He's a treasure hunter, so that connected with our idea. He gets in over his head, he's funny but he's also cocky. So was Nathan Fillion's character in the TV show *Firefly*; that was why our character was called *Nathan* Drake. You can relate to someone who's in over his head and then has to get out of it to save his skin. That was exactly what Nathan Drake was all about."

After being given his name, Nathan Drake needed a visual design, as did his opponents in the game. The most aesthetically interesting of these were the grossly mutated ancestors of Sir Francis Drake, and their Elizabethan origins briefly shaped their look. Bob Rafei explains that the depiction of *Uncharted*'s hero was also subject to revision. "In the early designs, Nathan Drake kind of looked like Johnny Knoxville, but his look evolved because we were trying to give it some stylisation. The 'creatures' were

» [PlayStation 3] There are puzzles peppered throughout *Uncharted*, but there were originally going to be many more.

COOL CHARACTERS

NAME
NATHAN DRAKE

BIOGRAPHY

Unlike the muscle-bound male protagonists found in other games of the time, Nathan Drake is an everyman with keen survival instincts who is hopelessly out of his depth. He can shoot straight but he largely gets by on his wits, and he always has a cutting quip to hand to defuse tense situations.

The colourful cast that make Uncharted relatable <<<<<<<

» [PlayStation 3] This tricky balancing challenge in *Uncharted* puts the PS3's motion-sensing controller to good use.

descendants of Sir Francis Drake. They had found this curse that had been entombed with a mummy in a sarcophagus, and throughout the generations they had become warped. There was a conversation to work out who they were. We even had them wearing Elizabethan lace collars, which looked so stupid! So that was abandoned very quickly."

In addition to opponents, allies were created for Nathan Drake. The morally dubious Victor 'Sully' Sullivan was conceived as a mentor and father figure to Nathan, whereas resourceful journalist Elena Fisher allowed for a romance of the sort found in screwball comedy movies. Dan Arey underscores the value of having three protagonists. "We wanted the older guy, the younger woman and the three connected characters. I like to write three characters in a lot of stories, because you always have a triangle. One of them is an outlier, one of them is a tie-breaker and one of them is a betrayer, and they're all working against each other. So for *Uncharted*, three characters was all about who should Nathan trust, and the pulling back and forth between these characters. That made things more interesting."

> "AMY HENNIG AND THE DESIGN TEAM WANTED TO MAKE SURE THAT THERE WERE THESE 'HOLY SHIT' MOMENTS; WE DEFINITELY WANTED TO HAVE A FEW OF THOSE"
> BOB RAFEI

Spilling out of Nathan sharing his surname with Sir Francis Drake was a plot point where the game's hero claimed to be a distant descendant searching for his legendary relative's coffin. With the explorer said to be buried at sea in the Caribbean, that became *Uncharted*'s setting. Bob Rafei considers the benefits of this environment. "There was the whole aspect of a South Pacific sea somewhere where there were real-life pirates! [*Uncharted*'s] game director Amy Hennig and the design team wanted to make sure that there were these 'holy shit' moments; we definitely wanted to have a few of those. Then the idea of being on an isolated island obviously gave us a good setting because we wanted it to be lost in time. We wanted to go for a lush organic environment, and we had gathered so much reference on tropical forests."

It can't be overstated just how important the task of researching the look of *Uncharted*'s lost island was. The ambitious plan for the game was to make it as close to photoreal as the PS3 would allow. Dan Arey recollects a parallel aspiration to give *Uncharted* an entirely unique look. "This was where Amy added a lot. We both loved human-created spaces that have been retaken by nature so we did a ton of research on them. We looked into everything ▶

» [PlayStation 3] *Uncharted*'s vehicle setpieces see Nathan and Elena driving and shooting from a jeep and jet skis.

» [PlayStation 3] As Nathan's health fails, blood coloured visuals tell you which direction he's getting shot at from.

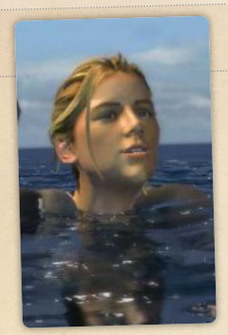
» [PlayStation 3] Early thoughts of incorporating parkour into *Uncharted* evolved into gravity-defying tests of skill.

» [PlayStation 3] When Nathan is taking a lot of damage this is reflected by the game slowly fading to shades of grey.

COOL CHARACTERS

NAME

ELENA FISHER



BIOGRAPHY

Eternally upbeat documentary maker Elena Fisher is like day to cynical treasure hunter Nathan's night. Nathan and mentor Victor Sullivan ditch Elena when they begin looking for El Dorado, but she ultimately proves herself unflappable under fire, a useful ally and the object of Nathan's desire.

The colourful cast that make Uncharted relatable <<<<<<<

from Chernobyl to Spanish castles. We just loved this idea that places that were once human had now gone back to jungle, because that gave them a primal feel. So we were looking at all sorts of reclaimed spaces, because we wanted that cool look."

As intense as the focus was on *Uncharted*'s visuals, this was equalled by the effort to establish the project's gameplay. There was a desire to take advantage of the sheer cliffs planned for the game's lost island by incorporating mechanics based around verticality. Judd Simantov reflects on this, and on discussions about puzzles and firefights. "Early on we got quite excited about parkour, but we ended up with climbing, jumping and swinging from ledges. That created the ability to scale the world. Amy initially wanted much more puzzle solving, but that transitioned. We had also originally gone for sticky shooting, where you weren't actually aiming. But then *Gears Of War* came out, and it really helped inform that. The culture was that you would have an idea and work on it. The next thing people would be saying was, 'Oh shit! This is great!'"

Another aspect of *Uncharted*'s tropical island setting was that the player effectively had a wide-open space to explore. At least it appeared that way. In actual fact, constraining environmental features, narrative driven objectives and subliminal signposting gave *Uncharted*'s gameplay a filmic linearity. Judd observes how this nonetheless felt unrestricted. "*Uncharted* had so many amazing things, but while everything gave you the perception of an open world you were actually very much guided. You really couldn't veer off easily. Similarly with the storylines; you had to do certain things, and they were very linear. We took a very cinematic approach, which at that time you didn't see a lot of. There weren't a lot of people looking at a game through a cinematic lens. So the things we did ultimately created a new experience."

"THERE WEREN'T A LOT OF PEOPLE LOOKING AT A GAME THROUGH A CINEMATIC LENS. SO THE THINGS WE DID ULTIMATELY CREATED A NEW EXPERIENCE"
JUDD SIMANTOV

The novel concept of a cinematic platformer with wide, linear levels was a clear evolution

from Naughty Dog's earlier titles. But while the *Crash Bandicoot* games were essentially on-rails and the *Jak & Daxter* series restricted players to certain courses, *Uncharted* subtly steered proceedings from scene to scene. Dan Arey explains how this played to the studio's strengths. "We came from the platformer world, we came from that space. So we understood that. But we were going from pretty linear mechanics to more open-world stuff. We were very concerned about opening up the world so much that you got lost and confused. So we wanted these tight routes that were really good for the combinatorial aspect of linear mechanics that we had developed through *Crash* and *Jak & Daxter*. We wanted to keep some of those things in there."

While retaining core aspects of its predecessors, *Uncharted* also incorporated innovative new mechanics inspired by emerging trends. Dan credits the game that inspired the free aiming in *Uncharted* as also providing a means for Nathan Drake to break the fourth wall, and explains how immersive storytelling was accommodated by visual cues baked into the environments. "We were over a year into development when *Gears Of War* came out. It had cover mechanics that took things to the next level. When we found cover mechanics, Nathan Drake could get behind a tree, turn, look at the camera and say something funny! We were also huge fans of games where the story wasn't all told in cutscenes. So we had the creatures leaving their footprints for you to see. Those were telling a story even as you were playing the game."

POLISHED PLOTLINES

NOTABLE THEMES IN UNCHARTED'S FILMIC NARRATIVE

TREASURE HUNT

■ If movies have taught us anything it's that the quest for priceless artefacts causes people to take extreme measures to obtain them. In *Uncharted*, Nathan Drake and an army of gun-toting henchmen are after a gold sarcophagus, which explains the ensuing chaos when a map to this treasure surfaces.

SCREWBALL COMEDY

■ The character dynamics in *Uncharted* mainly play out in cutscenes, with those featuring Nathan Drake and Elena Fisher taking their lead from the zany romantic comedies of the Thirties. The witty banter between the ill-matched pair provides light relief between and sometimes during intense moments.

HIGH ADVENTURE

■ Minutes into *Uncharted* an attack on Nathan and Elena's boat by pirates tells you you're in action movie territory. Parachuting out of a crashing plane, sky-high leaps of faith and a steep hillside escape from armed opponents in a jeep are just a few of the game's notable high-octane setpieces.

SURVIVAL HORROR

■ Deep within dark and abandoned catacombs, Nathan, Elena and their opponents are attacked by the warped and mutated descendants of Sir Francis Drake and his crew. Like all the best horror movie monsters they're foreshadowed early on, with footprints and a clawed Nazi's corpse being notable clues.

COOL CHARACTERS

NAME

VICTOR SULLIVAN

BIOGRAPHY

Ageing Lothario Victor 'Sully' Sullivan is a mentor to Nathan, although he seemingly betrays his protégée. He's heavily in debt, so the discovery of a map to the legendary gold city of El Dorado is his ticket out of trouble, until El Dorado turns out to be a virus-ridden corpse in a gold coffin.

The colourful cast that make Uncharted relatable <<<<<<<

GREAT GENRES

THE DISTINCT STYLES OF GAMEPLAY THAT DEFINE UNCHARTED

OPEN-WORLD ADVENTURE

■ The lost island that *Uncharted* unfolds on seems open to exploration but is actually restricted by natural barriers. Given that these would limit you in real life they don't detract from the game's open-world feel, and in any event they prevent you from getting lost or missing out on the action.

PLATFORMING

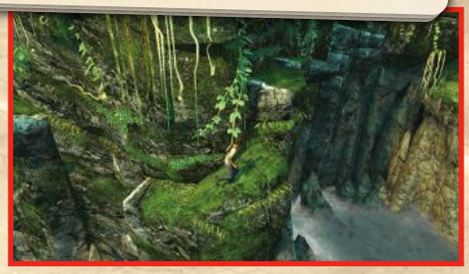
■ Although not a traditional platformer, *Uncharted* certainly has its share of platform-based challenges. Some memorable tests of platforming skill include leaping around ancient South American ruins and swinging between rock outcrops on vines. More daunting still are the ascents up sheer cliffs.

THIRD-PERSON SHOOTING

■ When you come across an open clearing in *Uncharted* you know to have a weapon handy. This is because they get flooded with Gabriel Roman's guns for hire soon after you enter them. You can pick up the weapons and ammo of any that you dispatch, which is good because you regularly run out of both.

MELEE COMBAT

■ The weapons in *Uncharted* are only limited by what the henchmen you disarm are carrying, but without ammo they're useless and that's in short supply. If you're unarmed and under attack then your only option is a bare knuckle fistfight. In these brawls it pays to know the most effective combos.



▶ Another area of *Uncharted* that was given depth was its combat. While this mostly revolved around projectile weapons, there were also close-quarters encounters with enemies that involved hand-to-hand melee fighting. This was fast paced with special moves and combos to learn, which Dan puts down to this being a proven approach. "Games like *God Of War* used combos, but I think we were maybe a little less gamey. We were trying to make the melee combat really interesting, and of course combos became a thing everywhere because rapid hand-to-hand combat is so powerful. It's a psychological approach that's really important in game design. If you initiate a combat sequence and then you're helped along with it you still feel like you have agency, because it feels like *you* did it."

A different type of combat was introduced with a jeep challenge where Nathan fired at pursuers with ally Elena at the wheel. Another vehicular stage saw them speeding along rapids on a jet ski, blasting floating mines as they went. Dan reasons that restrictive jungle clearings and a narrow river made these setpieces natural rather than artificially linear. "With the jeep, the idea was that the player felt in control in natural places – it wasn't like we had invisible walls stopping you. It was natural, and it made complete

» [PlayStation 3] The platforming in *Uncharted* isn't a million miles away from what you see in the *Jak & Daxter* games.

» [PlayStation 3] The ancient ruins found in *Uncharted* provide stiff platforming challenges without looking staged.

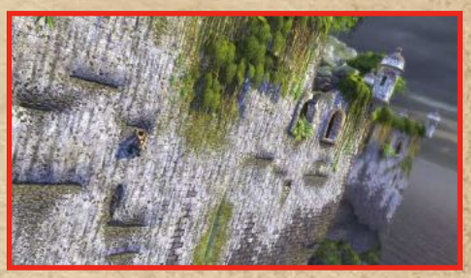
"THERE WAS THE SCENE WHERE NATHAN GOT WET FOR THE FIRST TIME. EVERYBODY WAS LOSING THEIR SHIT, BECAUSE THE ENVIRONMENT WAS CHANGING HIM!"
CARLOS GONZALEZ-OCHOA

sense to have semi-linear mechanics. You were on an island, so of course we had jet skis. It was an obvious move. You had water and waves, which were really important, so it was logical. Those were the sorts of solutions we were always looking for."

As much sense as jet skiing made given *Uncharted*'s tropical island setting, the coder responsible for the game's water effects Carlos Gonzalez-Ochoa nevertheless had to fight to keep the challenge in the game. Carlos is rightly proud of the effort he put into this setpiece and also feels the time taken to depict the effects of water on Nathan's appearance was well spent. "Oh my god! The jet skis! I did a lot of water effects for the jet skiing and it was almost cut. I spent months trying to get the water effect right, and also perfect the jet skis' movement. Then there was the scene where Nathan walked into a little lagoon. That was where he got wet for the first time. I worked on that forever until he got wet just the perfect amount. Everybody was losing their shit, because the environment was changing him!"

Perhaps more memorable from a level design perspective was a stage in *Uncharted* that involved platforming over waterfalls that tumbled down towards a deadly drop. Players would remember these for the high tension involved and the depiction of man versus nature. As the coder behind the waterfalls, Carlos naturally has different memories of them. "In the PS3 era you started getting shaders you could program to define how the pixels moved. There was a scene with these waterfalls, and I worked so many hours on those frickin' things! There are these things called flow maps where you have a static piece of mesh, and I made a shader [where] you could create water that flowed in any direction. It was just a trick really. It was an animated texture where you painted where the water had to flow."

Another standout feature in *Uncharted* was how its impossibly bright and colourful opening stages transitioned into dark and dimly lit levels as the game progressed. Dan Arey credits this ▶



» [PlayStation 3] Clinging to crumbling ledges hundreds of feet up demonstrates how *Uncharted* isn't for the fainthearted.

» [PlayStation 3] Making progress in *Uncharted* can often depend on overcoming environment-based logistical challenges.

» [PlayStation 3] *Uncharted*'s cover system allows Nathan to deliver snarky one-liners from a side-on camera view.

tonal shift to a desire to reflect what Naughty Dog was known for early on before visually reinforcing darker themes in the latter part of the game. "We wanted both light and dark environments. We came from a world of bright and colourful. We had never done a serious mature game before. You have to remember *Uncharted* was a transition time for Naughty Dog. We were all cute and fuzzy, and mascoty and goofy. This was the first time that we said that we were going to mature as a company. The colour shifts were straight out of film; that was filmic language but in an interactive world."

This cinematic approach was bolstered by *Uncharted*'s representation of the damage taken by Nathan. In place of a health bar, visual effects replicated how a movie might depict a character getting injured as seen through their eyes. Bob Rafei discusses this and the efforts to distinguish the criminal gang members looking to kill Nathan. "We had all of these post-processing effects, so we thought about how we could show that you were losing health. So the frame went red to show which direction you were getting fired at and the screen faded to grey as you took damage. We were trying to keep the HUD as minimal as possible because it was supposed to be a cinematic experience. We also tried to modify the bad guys as much as we could to make it feel like they were all different."

Despite the strides *Uncharted* made towards being interactive cinema, and its wealth of innovative features, the game that shipped fell slightly short of the highly ambitious and technically challenging vision of its developers. Judd Simantov qualifies this assessment by judging the finished game on how well it realised its central premise. "There were things we were having to assess in terms of how important they were relative to being able to get them done. As for where the compromises were made, well how many enemies, the complexity of the movement and the movement systems, we really pushed on those things. So relative to what we had set out to do we had to scale things back, but definitely the core of what we were trying to accomplish in terms of making this story-driven game remained true."

"WE HAD NEVER DONE A SERIOUS MATURE GAME BEFORE. YOU HAVE TO REMEMBER UNCHARTED WAS A TRANSITION TIME FOR NAUGHTY DOG"
DAN AREY

No matter what was omitted from *Uncharted*, the success of the game was undoubted. Carlos Gonzalez-Ochoa's final thoughts on the PS3 release reflect his experience of working on it, and he highlights his crowning achievement. "It was a fun time. It was my first game and I learned a lot of things. I'm especially proud of setting up the rain system for the final scene!"

Judd is equally positive, and clearly feels a strong personal connection to *Uncharted*. "My 13-year-old son has been playing it, and I've been sitting with him and reminiscing. So it still has a special place in my heart; it's one of the highlights of my career."

Bob Rafei, for his part, celebrates what the creators of *Uncharted* accomplished during a time of major change. "*Uncharted* was one of those moments where everything came together. I think it was a fantastic achievement. Of course we had our challenges, but everybody stepped up and really delivered a great product." Dan Arey is similarly enthusiastic about *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, and his parting words on what was his final Naughty Dog game after ten years at the studio are high praise indeed. "I'm so proud of that game. It was a project where everyone was giving their best. *Uncharted* went way beyond anything we had ever done before." ✱

COOL CHARACTERS

NAME
GABRIEL ROMAN

BIOGRAPHY
A wealthy British crime lord with an obsession for priceless antiquities, Gabriel Roman is looking to find El Dorado for himself. Gabriel has hired a crew of pirates and a group of mercenaries to make sure that he gets what he wants, and he's happy for them to kill anyone who stands in his way.

The colourful cast that make Uncharted relatable <<<<<<<

» [PlayStation 3] You alternate between running into battle all guns blazing and taking cover in *Uncharted*'s many firefights.

» [PlayStation 3] As well as adding depth to *Uncharted*, melee combat gives you options when you're low on ammo.

EPIC ENVIRONMENTS

STUNNING LOCATIONS THAT HELP BRING UNCHARTED TO LIFE

PANAMA COAST

■ After finding Sir Francis Drake's diary in an empty coffin off the sun-kissed coast of Panama, Sully flies Nathan and Elena away from their burning vessel to an idyllic coastal inlet. Nathan and Sully soon decide that Elena is a liability, and speed off in Sullivan's boat while she's on a call.

RAIN FOREST

■ After being directed to ruins in the Amazon jungle in Panama by Sir Francis Drake's diary, Nathan and Sully come across a Nazi submarine resting in a waterfall. As well as the sub's long dead and mutilated captain, Nathan finds the missing page from the diary and a map to the fabled El Dorado.

ANCIENT CATACOMBS

■ Once on the hidden island mapped out in Francis Drake's diary, ancient challenges set out in the text lead Nathan underground to near-dark catacombs located under a monastery. As well as evidence of Nazi operations in the catacombs, Nathan finds murderous creatures in the underground complex.

AQUATIC HABITATS

■ Since it's set on an island, it follows that water is so prevalent in *Uncharted*'s environments. Deep lagoons separate Nathan from objectives, while waterfalls with natural stone pillars at either side demand skilful platforming. There are also rapids to jet ski up while targeting floating mines.

Soulcalibur II

THAT TIME LINK STORMED THE STAGE OF HISTORY

» RETROREVIVAL

» NINTENDO GAMECUBE » 2003 » NAMCO (PROJECT SOUL)

The *Soulcalibur* series is dormant, having lost its lustre in recent times. If Namco announced *Soulcalibur VII* tomorrow, it might as well be subtitled *Mission To Moscow* for me. It wasn't always this way. When *Soulcalibur II* arrived on home consoles in 2003 it was a huge event. The game was already playable in the arcades, but just like the Dreamcast version of *Soulcalibur*, the console version was overhauled and upgraded, adding additional game modes, extra characters and a new sheen. There was a massive buzz around it.

This was also the first game in the series to be platform agnostic, being released simultaneously for the PlayStation 2, Xbox and GameCube. And in a marketing masterstroke, each version featured an exclusive character. The PS2 release brought in Heihachi from Namco's own *Tekken* series, which was a lazy choice (although forgivable, as it's since been revealed that it was originally supposed to be Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VII*, but the licensing deal fell through). The Xbox game received comic-book character Spawn, who joined another Todd McFarlane creation Necrid, a brand-new character that appeared in all three versions. The GameCube version, meanwhile, enlisted the services of Link, the Hero Of Hyrule.

I think it's safe to say that the GameCube version KO'd the others in the battle of the exclusive combatants. Link entered the fray wearing his classic green tunic, brandishing the Master Sword and Hylian Shield. He could also use projectiles – firing his bow and flinging bombs and boomerangs. In specific stages, the rousing *The Legend Of Zelda* theme would play, adding another element to this already heady concoction. This was premium fan service and a gift for GameCube owners.

I reviewed the PS2 version for a magazine back in 2003 and I awarded it 10/10. Looking back, that was too high. I still stand by the score, but it should have been 9/10 for the PS2 version, with full marks going to the GameCube version and its perfect guest spot. ✱

>> This month we revisit Master Chief's original adventure, discover a brand-new spin-off in the Disgaea series, go hands-on with the latest Super Pocket and blast off into space with Truxton Extreme

» [PC] Sneaking up on enemies remains highly satisfying. You can see Tim drew his attention.

Halo: Campaign Evolved

IS IT THIRD TIME LUCKY FOR MASTER CHIEF ORIGINAL ADVENTURE?

INFORMATION

- **SYSTEM:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** XBOX SERIES S/X, PLAYSTATION 5
- **PRICE:** £49.99 - £69.99
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PUBLISHER:** XBOX GAME STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER:** HALO STUDIOS
- **PLAYERS:** 1-4

***Halo: Combat Evolved* is arguably the most important game in the Xbox's history, so it makes sense that Microsoft would continually return to Master Chief's first adventure.** What doesn't make sense is the various design decisions that new custodians Halo Studios have added (and sometimes removed).

I first encountered *Halo* on the original Xbox and everything about it blew me away, from the intelligent AI of the game's enemies, to its life-like textures, immersive cutscenes and excellent LAN-based multiplayer. As you can imagine, *Halo: Campaign Evolved* looks spectacular, dramatically upping the game's resolution and detail, but it doesn't always *feel* like the game I first fell in love with all those years ago.

Some of the new colour choices for the later levels can make it extremely hard to work out what's going on, while the greatly enhanced environmental detail also means that it's not always clear where you're going. This is particularly niggling when you realise that several levels have been shrunken down to *ease* backtracking which could often happen in the original game. The additional cutscenes sometimes feel a little superfluous as well.

Gunplay still feels satisfying, capturing the exhilaration of taking down a gargantuan Flood enemy with a shotgun, but the AI doesn't feel quite as good as it did in the original game (or *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* for that matter). It's most noticeable with your team members but the later difficulty levels don't feel as polished as those earlier releases.

» [PC] *Halo*'s sniper rifle is one of the best around and it remains just as devastating to use today.

BRIEF HISTORY

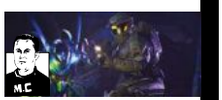
» *Halo: Combat Evolved* arrived in 2001 as a launch game for the Xbox, Microsoft's first console. Created by Bungie, the series would go on to great success and the high point for many came with *Halo: Reach*, Bungie's last game for Microsoft as it entered a new partnership with Activision. While later core games in the series failed to gain the same acclaim, it remains one of Microsoft's biggest gaming franchises.

★PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Truxton Extreme

It certainly isn't perfect, but I've had a lot of fun playing this and the new soundtrack is immense.



MARTYN

Halo: Campaign Evolved

I never played the original *Halo*, so I can't comment on how well it works as an update, but I am bowled over by this on my PS5. Seriously, how have I not played *Halo* before?

TIM

Marvel Puzzle Quest

This is the only mobile game I play, and when I say 'play' I mean 'plaaaaay'. I'm now on day 4,030, which means I've been playing it for roughly 11 years. Blimey!

» [PC] *Halo*'s impressive textures have come a long way since 2001 where I'd constantly stop and look at the bark and grass.

» [PC] While the online campaign is solid, I'd have much preferred access to the original multiplayer options.

For me though, the most egregious loss from this latest edition is stripping out the original multiplayer that made my Saturday nights so entertaining for the good part of two years. You can still play co-operatively with a friend or online, but the LAN-based battles I used to enjoy with my friends on several TVs is no longer possible. Halo Studios has included the option of a Firefight mode, but rather than being an intense battle against waves of increasingly challenging opponents it just lets you play the campaign with three online friends. It's a nice enough feature, but feels like a big step back after what was available in the original game and *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary*.

While the hobbling of the multiplayer is very disappointing, the inclusion of three brand-new missions that take place before the events of the main campaign are a welcome extra. The levels are well designed, there are a great range of enemies to take down (including many from the later games) and you get a bit more lore on Sgt Avery Johnson, which is bound to please long-running fans.

Mechanically there's lots going on as well, some of which modernises the game greatly. Master Chief can now sprint, he's able to hijack manned vehicles that the Covenant are using and numerous other quality-of-life improvements from the later games. A large number of new weapons from *Halo* 2 onwards have been introduced as well, from *Reach*'s Needle Rifle to the Sentinel Beam, Covenant Energy Sword and Brute Plasma Rifle. While it gives the player a lot more options in battle, some of the new weapons do feel too overpowered in certain areas. I often found myself running out of guns, or unable to pick some up, which I never experienced in the earlier games. Collectible Skulls have also been included, which are very well hidden and can greatly modify the core game experience in both useful and negative ways. Even the Warthog has been upgraded so that all four players in Firefight mode can use the vehicle.

Ultimately, *Halo: Campaign Evolved* feels like a title that's more suited to those gamers who have never experienced Master Chief's original epic quest. There's no denying that this is a very solid interpretation of a truly classic game, but if you've already got access to *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* this new edition becomes a lot harder to recommend. Losing the original multiplayer maps is a step too far for me personally, and while the new missions and weapon integrations are certainly a nice touch, they don't feel good enough for a third dip, unless of course, you *really* love Master Chief. ✱

» [PC] The Warthog has been modified so four players can use it when participating in Firefight mode.

» [PC] The game's weapons still feel nice and meaty, particularly once you pick up the likes of the shotgun.

» [PC] While later levels like The Library have been redesigned, they're still not always easy to navigate.

In a nutshell

Halo Studios has made plenty of tweaks, but they're not always for the better. It's a good facsimile of the original classic that will appeal to new gamers, but fans of its earlier iterations may well end up being disappointed.

>> Score **79%**

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED (XBOX)

▼ SOMETHING NEW
HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION (PC)

PICK OF THE MONTH

Super Pocket: Rare Edition

ARE WE IN FOR A RARE TREAT?

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** SUPER POCKET
- **ALSO ON:** NA
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £59.99
- **PUBLISHER:** HYPER MEGA TECH!
- **DEVELOPER:** HYPER MEGA TECH!
- **PLAYERS:** 1

BRIEF HISTORY

» Designed with the casual gamer in mind, the Super Pocket was launched in 2023 with editions featuring Capcom and Taito games. Atari, Technōs, Neo Geo and Data East editions followed, and September sees the release of an Activision edition featuring 34 of its Atari 2600 games.

» The device's striking red, yellow and blue colour scheme is based on the *Banjo-Kazooie* logo.

GO DEEPER

The facts behind Super Pocket: Rare Edition

» If you already own the *Rare Collection 1 Evercade* cart, you'll find eight of the games also included here. The 'exclusive' titles on this device are limited to *Slalom, Snake Rattle 'N' Roll, Solar Jetman, RC Pro-Am II, Battletoads In Battlemaniacs* and *Banjo-Kazooie.*

» In October Blaze will release *Banjo-Kazooie* and its sequel *Banjo-Tooie* as a physical Evercade cart. This double-pack will also come bundled with the new Evercade Nexus handheld.

Blaze Entertainment is back with a new Super Pocket device, courtesy of its Hyper Mega Tech! brand. This is the seventh such release, so by now you're presumably familiar with the hardware. If not, the Super Pocket is a neat little handheld featuring a sharp 2.8-inch screen, a d-pad and range of face buttons (plus four additional 'shoulder' buttons on its rear), and a slot for inserting Evercade carts. Your mileage in this new model is very likely linked to the pre-loaded games from Rare, arguably the UK's most important and influential software house.

There are 14 games in total, picked from the company's first 15 years. Going back to the beginning, to the pre-Rare years, there are five Spectrum titles originally published by Ultimate Play The Game: *Jetpac*, *Lunar Jetman*, *Atic Atac*, *Knight Lore* and *Gunfright*. Of these, *Jetpac* and *Atic Atac* are particularly suited to the handheld format, as you can jump straight in and be grinning like a fool in seconds. *Knight Lore* is a timeless classic, but it's great to see *Gunfright* included. This was the last Spectrum game developed by the Stamper brothers and it's often overlooked.

Next up are six NES games from the early Rare era: *Slalom*, *Cobra Triangle*, *Snake Rattle 'N' Roll*, *Solar Jetman*, *Battletoads* and *RC Pro-Am II*. There's not an average title here and they highlight how smoothly the company transitioned to Nintendo's console. Rare's output for the SNES and Game Boy Color are represented by two titles, *Battletoads In Battlemaniacs* and *Conker's Pocket Tales* respectively. It's pleasing to see these slightly deeper cuts, especially as they weren't even included in the comprehensive *Rare Replay* collection.

The headliner is undoubtedly *Banjo-Kazooie*, Rare's wonderful collect-a-thon originally released for the Nintendo 64. When this device was announced I did wonder why Blaze hadn't opted instead for the Game Boy Advance entry, *Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge*, a game that had already adapted the controls and display for handheld play. I shouldn't have worried because the game has been thoughtfully updated to work as well as possible on the Super Pocket. The d-pad will never replace the N64's analogue stick but it does a damn good job of emulating it. There are also plenty of extra options, allowing you to tweak the camera and controls until you find a combination that suits. The four buttons on the back of the device are all required when playing *Banjo-Kazooie*, which generally works well – although as we've mentioned in previous Super Pocket reviews, they are a little awkward to use.

Blaze recently announced that the price of the Super Pocket will increase from £49.99 to £59.99 when current stock levels are replenished. Even so, it still represents excellent value for money, particularly when you consider the games included in the Rare Edition. *Banjo-Kazooie* is still brilliant, as are many of the others. Altogether they offer a solid base of titles, which you can build on with additional Evercade carts.

» [Super Pocket] *Banjo-Kazooie* benefits from multiple enhancements to aid its transition to the Super Pocket.

» [Super Pocket] Conker, seen here in his innocent GBC days, before he developed a bad attitude and a potty mouth.

In A Nutshell

It may look toy-like, but this Super Pocket edition should be a serious consideration for Rare fans. Even with the pending price bump it represents excellent value for money.

» [Super Pocket] Originally released in 1983, *Jetpac* was Ultimate's dream debut. It's still just as playable today.

YOUR GAME IS NOT OVER

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[Y]/[Y]

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★ PICK OF THE MONTH

Truxton Extreme

» **System:** PC (tested), PS5, Switch 2, Xbox Series S/X » **Buy it for:** £19.99 (digital), £30+ (physical) » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

I still own the original *Tatsujin* (as *Truxton* is known in Japan) on my Mega Drive, so I've been keeping my eye on this sequel for some time.

Truxton Extreme's main focus is Story, which lets you play as three different characters and features a slick comic-book format. The only real downside to Story is that I found its chapters (effectively single levels from the main Arcade mode) quite easy to complete. (Although if you are struggling with this mode of the game you'll find Heart Starter a much easier place to begin your adventure.) The story itself is your typical invasion tale, but it is enjoyable to read through and features some lovely art.

Regardless of what mode you sink your teeth into, you'll find *Truxton Extreme* to be a solid blaster. The available weapons feel nice and balanced, there's a slick scoring system to master and an enjoyable Team option that lets two players share their resources and take on the enemy forces together. There are also lovely renditions of past *Truxton* tunes, courtesy of original composer Masahiro Yuge.

It's not all good news however. Visually I'm not a big fan of the new polygon look, with the game sporting the same plastic-looking visuals that were so frequent during the PS3 era, while the decision to extend the gameplay beyond the 16:9 playing area is also baffling as it gives you far too much space to cover. Another thing to consider in Arcade mode is that the game's overly long levels become much more of an issue when played as one, as it's more of a slog to play through than the bite-sized challenges that Story mode offers.

Truxton Extreme is certainly a solid return to form and a great starting base for future games, but it doesn't quite match the brilliance of Toaplan's originals.

>> **Score 78%**

» [PC] *Truxton Extreme*'s comic-book story looks great, even if it's not the most original tale.

» [PC] Fill the EX bar and you can deliver powered shots for a limited time that net you huge points.

Culdcept Begins

» **System:** Switch 2 (tested), PC, PS5, Switch
» **Buy it for:** £35.99 » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

As the title suggests, this is a prequel to the original *Culdcept*, released in 1997 for the Sega Saturn, and only in Japan. It also acts as a soft reboot for the turn-based strategy series, which if you're unfamiliar with, is best summed up as a cross between *Monopoly*'s board game movement and *Magic: The Gathering*'s card game mechanics.

The main single-player campaign is fine and features a twee story, but it actually serves as an elongated tutorial designed to prepare you for the real challenge – online play against others. The Switch 2 version supports GameShare and Mouse Mode. Overall, this serves as a solid entry point to the long-running series.

MARTYN CARROLL

>> **Score 77%**

Hardcore Gaming 101 Presents: Metal Gear • Silent Hill And Other Konami Classics

» **Buy it from:** Amazon.co.uk » **Buy it for:** £23

The latest tome from Kurt Kalata is bound to go down well with *Metal Gear* and *Silent Hill* fans. It's a detailed love letter to the two popular series, with insightful looks at all the core games and spin-offs and even some developer commentary as well. It's unlikely you'll discover much new info if you're an ardent fan, but it's well written and features useful things like version comparisons and key figures from the biggest games. The Konami Classics section is less impressive, and feels a little more rag-tag in its approach. The inclusion of *Snatcher, Zone Of The Enders* and *Policenauts* make sense, but entries like *Rakugakids, Contra: Operation Galuga* and *Nanobreaker* feel more random (but no less interesting to read about).

DARRAN JONES

Disgaea Mayhem

» **System:** PC (tested), PS5, Switch, Switch 2
» **Buy it for:** £45.99+ » **Buy it from:** Online, retail

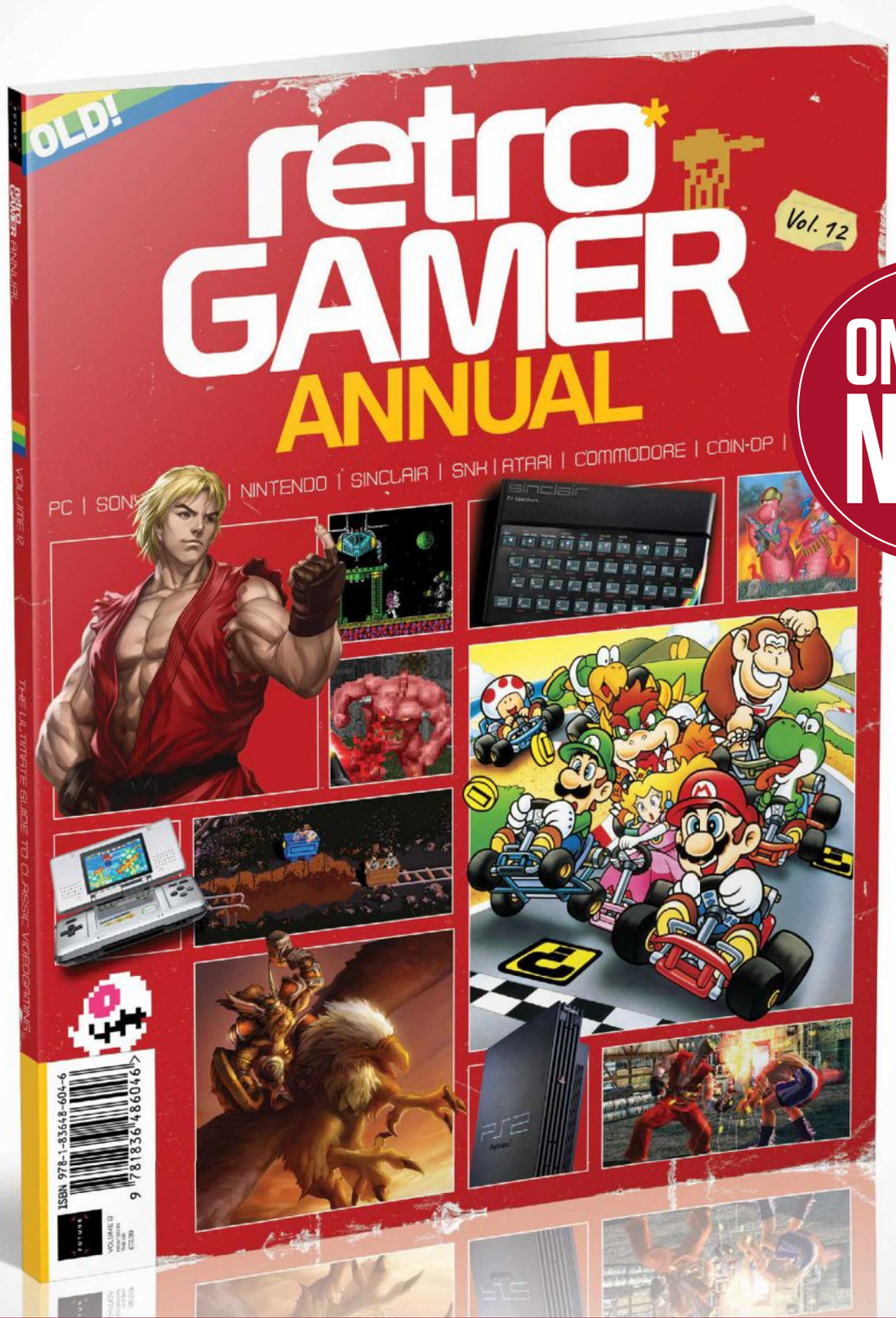
Kudos to Nippon Ichi for taking *Disgaea* in a bold-new direction. Unfortunately, this *Dynasty Warriors*-styled take on the RPG has quite a few problems. The good news is there's a wacky story at the game's core, many of the series' mechanics are well implemented and there's a bunch of recognisable enemies to battle. Sadly, the core levels are repetitive and bland to fight through, combat feels very basic, while the difficulty balancing is rather weak. Once you start levelling up items you become too strong for the rest of the main campaign, meaning there's no challenge at all. There's a lot of nice ideas here, but this feels more like a proof of concept, rather than a fully envisioned game.

DARRAN JONES

>> **Score 54%**

CELEBRATE THE BEST OF RETRO GAMING IN 2025

Our latest tome features an incredible amount of fantastic content from Retro Gamer's past 12 months. Iconic characters, huge franchises and classic systems all feature, making it an essential read for retro fans. Don't miss it!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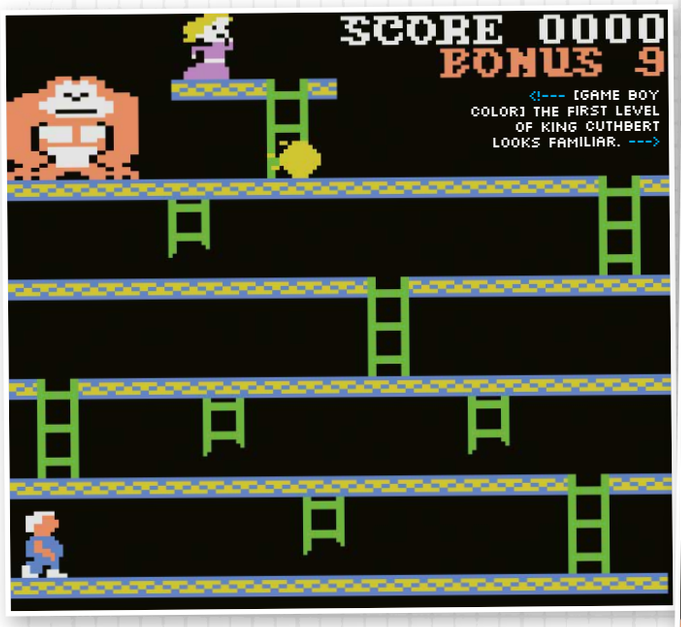
THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>



<INTRO> DO YOU LIKE CHIPTUNE MUSIC? THE ALBUM ECHOES OF KINDNESS HAS BEEN COMPOSED BY APOGEE BREAKS, USING AN AMIGA 1200. TIMO PAUL SAYS, "EVERY PENNY OF PROFIT FROM THIS RELEASE IS DONATED TO FARM ANIMAL SANCTUARIES TO RESCUE ANIMALS FROM SLAUGHTER AND PROVIDE THEM WITH LIFELONG CARE." BUY IT AT BANDCAMP VIA BIT.LY/ECHOESOFKINDNESS AND THEN BE SURE TO CHECK OUT THE GREAT HOMEBREW REVIEWS, A PETSCII FPS, A LOOK AT A FORTHCOMING NEXT GAME, AND OUR NOSTALGIC MAIN FEATURE. </INTRO>

<MAIN HEADER>

CUTHBERT RETURNS

<INTRO> LÁSZLÓ RAJCSÁNYI TELLS US HOW HE CREATED A NEW GAME BOY COLOR COMPILATION OF MICRODEAL'S CLASSIC CUTHBERT GAMES </INTRO>

<BODY> **László Rajcsányi grew up with a Commodore 16, which led to a love for Microdeal's star.** "A friend lent me *Cuthbert In The Cooler*. It became the very first game my father and I played together. Almost 40 years have passed, and it was an incredible feeling to recreate this little character for the Game Boy."

In 2019, László discovered GB Studio, which led to an idea. "It caught my eye because of its drag-and-drop approach," he tells us. "I ended up making a game for my sons. I started looking into what classic games I could adapt, and that's how *Treasure Island* and *Cuthbert In The Cooler* entered the picture." László previously produced two compilations of Tynesoft Commodore 16 conversions. "Producing physical cartridges has always been a non-profit venture," he admits. "I was thrilled that these sold out. I designed everything myself in Illustrator, and the print shop [in Hungary] produced them in limited runs. I have created a total of 256 games so far, all available on the wls.hu website."

László admits there were problems with the Microdeal *Cuthbert Anthology*. "I was only familiar with the Commodore 16 versions of three games;

MICRODEAL MEMORIES

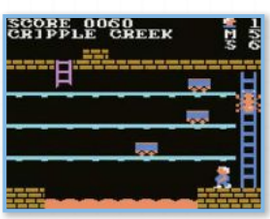
<INTRO> FIVE CUTHBERT TITLES YOU MAY NOT HAVE PLAYED BEFORE </INTRO>

CUTHBERT AND THE GOLDEN CHALICE

<Head underground and find the valuable Golden Chalice, but watch out for snakes, ghosts and other hazards. />

CUTHBERT IN THE COOLER

<Pick up the key and bonus objects while blowing up enemies using your trusty bombs. Kaboom! />



CUTHBERT IN THE MINES

<You must dodge the moving minecarts and the spider firing poison to reach the next level of the mine. />

CUTHBERT IN SPACE

<This is László's personal favourite and sees you collect fuel cans to refuel your spaceship, dodging or shooting the moving enemies. />

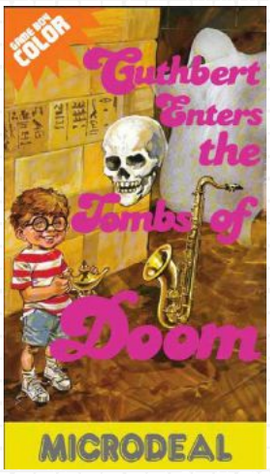
CUTHBERT GOES WALKABOUT

<Paint the lines and dodge the enemies in this title that's clearly been inspired by the excellent *Amidar*. />

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- A LOOK AT THE BOX AND MANUAL. --->



<!--- A PAGE FROM THE MANUAL, REWORKED FROM THE CLASSIC COVER ART. --->

REQUIRED SCORES
0700 POINTS x x 0150 POINTS
0600 POINTS x x 0250 POINTS
3600 POINTS x x 0350 POINTS
2200 POINTS x x 0500 POINTS

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] THE NEW PAC-MAN CLONE CUTHBERT GOES GOBBLING IS UNLOCKED WHEN YOU REACH THESE TARGET SCORES. --->

CUTHBERT ENTERS THE TOMBS OF DOOM
UP DOWN LEFT RIGHT A B SELECT START
UP DOWN LEFT RIGHT FIRE --- RESET PAUSE
MICRODEAL
MICRODEAL CORNWALL

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] BEFORE EACH GAME, THE CONTROLS ARE SHOWN ON THE SCREEN. --->

<!--- LÁSZLÓ'S CUSTOM MICRODEAL T-SHIRT WAS INSPIRED BY PROMOTIONAL SHIRTS THAT MICRODEAL USED TO GIVE OUT. --->

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] KONAMI'S TUTANKHAM WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR CUTHBERT ENTERS THE TOMBS OF DOOM. --->

I checked out other systems, and I was shocked. *Cuthbert In The Cooler* looked completely different on the TRS-80 and Dragon 32/64. I strictly stuck to the C16 versions. I had to modify the GB Studio 2.0 engine and tweak the source code. The most difficult to port was *Cuthbert Goes Walkabout*."

There is also a hidden game to unlock as László explains. "I thought it would be great to make a completely new game starring Cuthbert. When we discussed it with Subvert, the idea came up for an Easter egg. I put together a *Pac-Man*-style game. I think it turned out to be perfect for a few minutes of fun."

Paul Andrews of Subvert talks about his involvement. "Microdeal seemed to grow and grow over time. Linking the games with a consistent character made these games their own; I'm pleased we are helping it live on. We are working with László, helping him get this cartridge out for fans. In due course we will release more onto the Nintendo Switch."

Before he goes, László shares one final story. "I had a custom bright yellow T-shirt made, featuring Cuthbert on the front and the Microdeal logo on the back. When my wife saw it, she said the character looked terrible. However, my son, who is now 18, said he wanted it because it looked 'cool'. Cuthbert is definitely not the, 'I wish he were my son,' type, but he fits perfectly into the era's mould of a computer kid who sits in front of the screen all day. I don't know if I would have chosen him as a company mascot, but it worked out for Microdeal, just like Mario did for Nintendo." You can enjoy Cuthbert's return by visiting wls.hu/microdeal </BODY>

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] GRAB THE ENERGY PULSES AND DODGE THE BUGS IN WACKY ROBOT. --->

NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

<**Amstrad Plus**: *Bomb Jack GX* recreates the arcade game for Plus machines and the GX4000. Get defusing at bit.ly/bombjackgx />

<**C64**: Rhythm action game *Goatbeat* lets you play along with classic Rob Hubbard, Ben Daglish and Matt Gray tunes. You'll find it by bopping over to bit.ly/goatbeat-c64 />

<**ColecoVision**: Electric Dreams converted Atari 2600 games *Crackpots* and *Taz*. Take a stroll to electric-dreams.itch.io />

<**Game Boy**: *Taxi Boy* is PCNONO's *Crazy Taxi* demake (DMG and Color), €3.90 download or cartridge on preorder. Catch a ride by visiting bit.ly/taxiboy-gb />

<**Neo Geo**: Kaiju Wasp converted their excellent single-screen platformer *Blue & Red Fight The Robots*. You'll find it at bit.ly/bluered-neogeo />

<**PC**: Richard Langford (**RG** 286) has released *Chuckie Egg 3*, inspired by the original. Head on over to bit.ly/chuckieegg3-pc />

<**Plus/4**: Csabo and Kichy released puzzle game *Dr Margo*. Give it a try at bit.ly/drmargo-plus4 />

<**Vectrex**: Survival horror game *Dark Alien In Deep Space* is available in two variants (Solaris and Teria) with screen and controller overlays at ar-vectrex.com for €79. />

<**VIC-20**: Beamrider's *Joust* and *Rally-X Reloaded* (+35K expansion), gekka's *Atic Atac* and *Sabre Wulf* from (+35K), and Kweepa's *Jet Set Willy* (unexpanded VIC with disk drive, or 16K expansion) are in the Denial thread for 2026 releases. More info at tinyurl.com/vic20-2026 />

<**ZX81**: *Zevious Seven* makes you Earth's last hope in this *Xevious*-inspired shmup. 16K expansion is needed, with support for UDG and Chroma boards. Get blasting at bit.ly/zevious-zx81 />

<**ZX Spectrum**: Rob Pearmain's platformer *Wacky Robot* (pictured) is available for free download (16K/48K128K supported) at bit.ly/wacky-zx with Cronosoft publishing the physical cassette via cronosoft.fwscart.com />

CHAMPION CODER

JIM 'JIMBO' ORLANDO

<INTRO> JIM WORKED WONDERS WITH PETSCII GRAPHICS TO CREATE WOLFENSTEIN-STYLE FPS GAMES ON COMMODORE MACHINES </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: TORONTO, CANADA WEBSITE: JIMBO.ITCH.IO FORMAT: PET, C64
PREVIOUS GAMES: PETSCII SIDE- SCROLLING PLATFORMER (PET), ESCAPE FROM PETSCII CASTLE (PET), ESCAPE FROM PETSCII PLANET (C64)
WORKING ON: ESCAPE FROM PETSCII PLANET CAMPAIGN B (C64) />

WHAT GOT YOU INTERESTED IN MAKING PET GAMES, JIM?

My parents bought me a Commodore PET in 1981. I took a bit of a detour through life and work, etc, but returned to programming games on the PET and now the C64 in 2020 or so. Williams' *Defender* has always been my favourite, and that was the first game that I made on the PET. I use CBM PRG Studio as my development environment.

<!--- JIM HAS PORTED SOME OF HIS PET GAMES TO DAVID MURRAY'S COMMANDER X16. --->

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE 3D TECHNIQUE FOR ESCAPE FROM PETSCII CASTLE?

I read the *Game Engine Black Book*, which described how *Wolfenstein 3D* worked. I realised that it could be done on an 8-bit 6502 machine. *Wolf3D* was originally released on a 1992 Intel 286 with 640K memory – doing it on a computer that was ten years older [with] 32K of memory would be an interesting challenge. It worked out great, because the character graphics and no colour limitations simplify what processing is required.

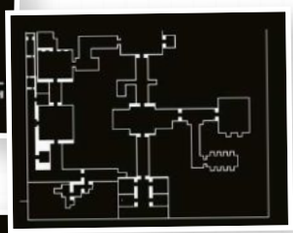
HOW DIFFICULT WAS IT TO TRANSFER THE TECHNIQUE TO THE C64 FOR ESCAPE FROM PETSCII PLANET?

The game engine is very similar code, but I added colour, took advantage of sprites for enemies, incorporated the ability to load different levels, and added a level designer. I am pretty happy with the result and find myself just enjoying playing it, which is a great sign.

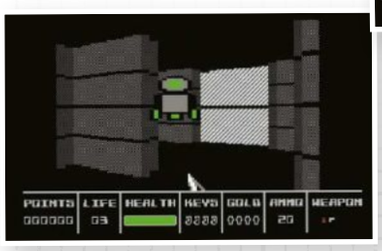
HOW COMPLEX WAS THE LEVEL DESIGNER TO CREATE?

It took about two months. I gave a talk at the World Of Commodore conference on how the engine works, and people started asking how I design the levels. I was using a spreadsheet that took the design and created the byte codes for the level that got loaded in. But based on the questions, I decided to create a level designer. Four of the five 'Campaign A' levels were designed from scratch on the level designer. I am designing new levels – and will release them as 'Campaign B'. />

<!--- [C64] THIS SECURITY ORB IS ONE OF THE ADVERSARIES IN ESCAPE FROM PETSCII PLANET. --->



<!--- [C64] THE MAP VIEW OF AN ESCAPE FROM PETSCII PLANET LEVEL BEING EDITED. --->



<!--- [C64] BRINGING A KNIFE TO THE GUNFIGHT WITH THIS DRONE WAS A BAD IDEA... --->

<!--- [PET] ESCAPE FROM PETSCII CASTLE PROVED THE VIABILITY OF RAYCASTING WITH PETSCII GRAPHICS. --->

DATA BURST

SUPER SUNNY WORLD

<INFO FORMAT: NES (REVIEWED), STEAM CREDITS: MATT HUGHSON (DESIGN, PROGRAMMING), KENNETH FEJER (LEAD ARTIST), COFFEE VALEN BAT (LEAD MUSICIAN) PRICE: TBC
WEB: SUPERSUNNYWORLD.COM / BIT.LY/SUPERSUNNY-STEAM />

<BODY> **Sunny and her sister Shade have washed up on an island filled with cute but deadly enemies.** Their task is to escape, so Sunny decides to jump around and collect flowers – while a second player armed with the Zapper can play as Shade, shooting enemies with her trusty lightning rod gun (which does take time to recharge).

This entertaining twist on the platform genre has plenty of familiar touches – secret rooms, warp zones, and power-ups hidden in bricks, but still manages to feel fresh. Pearl Power lets Sunny shoot pearls at vulnerable enemies, while every level has five Hidden Flowers to discover. If you want to attain the WOW rating, you need to find all five flowers and jump to the top of the vine at the level's end. There are bosses to defeat at the end of each of the eight worlds (split into four sub-levels), while collecting flowers allows you to exchange them for Coins; these are spent in the Pack Shack to buy Cards for your collection (with 24 to unlock and view). Gorgeous graphics and superb music make this very enjoyable, and the Kid Mode (with its easier difficulty) is fantastic for younger players. This is a superb NES experience that will leave you wanting to discover all of its secrets. </BODY>

SCORE: 91%

<!--- [NES] SWIMMING THROUGH THIS SECRET ROOM, USE THE LOGS TO MOVE BETWEEN SCREENS. --->

<!--- [NES] JUMPING ON A SHUCK WILL LET YOU KICK ITS SHELL TO HIT OTHER ENEMIES OR SLIDE IT INTO A BLOCK. --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- [C64] NOW THE ENEMY IS TRAPPED IN A PLASMA BUBBLE; WALK INTO IT BEFORE IT CAN ESCAPE. --->

<!--- [C64] THIS DROPPED EXPLOSIVE WILL DESTROY THE CRACKED ROCK, GIVING YOU ACCESS TO THE RED CRYSTAL. --->

INFE2TATION: MYSTERY OF THE CRYSTAL MOON

<INFO FORMAT: C64 (DIGITAL DOWNLOAD) CREDITS: MONTE BOYD
PRICE: $4.99 WEB: BIT.LY/INFE2TATION-C64 />

<BODY> **The Galactic Sheriff and her robot sidekick, D3P-UT, from *Infeztation* (88%, RG 269) return to investigate illegal mining.** Most levels require you to find every coloured Crystals, while blasting or dodging enemies. Passcodes save your progress across the four different sections (the Surface, Crystal Caves, the Refinery and the Lost City). Later levels add explosives to blast cracked rocks, coloured keys to open doors, blocks to use as platforms or drop onto switches, while D3P-UT can use Crystals to overload Battery Units. Gun upgrades include rapid fire and the Plasma Gun that traps enemies in a bubble. The graphics are excellent, the soundtrack changes for each area, and the compelling action will keep you playing until the mystery is solved. </BODY>

SCORE: 90%

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] SHOOTING THE ATTACKING ENEMIES CAN REVEAL POWER-UPS, INCLUDING A SHIELD, SMART BOMB, AND STRONGER BULLETS. --->

<!--- [GAME BOY COLOR] YOU'VE WIPED OUT THE SHIELD GENERATORS; NOW THE SPACESHIP IS GOING TO BLOW!. --->

STARSEED 3

<INFO FORMAT: GAME BOY COLOR (DIGITAL DOWNLOAD) CREDITS: SHANE MCCAFFERTY/ROCKETSHIP PARK (DEVELOPER), SLOOPYGOOP (SOUNDTRACK), THALAMUS INTERACTIVE (PUBLISHER)
PRICE: $2.99 WEB: BIT.LY/STARSEED3 />

<BODY> **Destroy a series of massive spaceships (with rock music-related names) in this impressive vertically scrolling sequel.** First, you must survive waves of attacking enemies, some of which drop power-ups, then you must destroy the surface features until the spaceship explodes, and you fly onto the next one. You can resume at higher levels with the score and remaining ships at that point. Excellent graphics and special effects are complemented by Sloopygoop's intense tunes. This is just as addictive as the previous two games; can we get a *Starseed* compilation cartridge, please, Thalamus? </BODY>

SCORE: 87%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> ROBERT MORAN'S NEXT PLATFORMER, THE TOWER, WILL ARRIVE SOON WITH GRAPHICS FROM A GENUINE INDUSTRY LEGEND </INTRO>

<BODY> **Robert's new project was inspired by the NES game *Micro Mages*.** "This appealed to me, so the idea was set – a sci-fi game requiring the player to climb to the top of each level, but with more shooting involved!" Facebook provided an important part of the puzzle, as Robert explains. "I read a post where Bill Harbison was asking whether anyone needed any graphics help. Who better to help than an industry veteran?"

So in addition to Bill's help, how is *The Tower* coming together? "I currently use Visual Studio Code, with ASM Code lens, DeZog debugger, Z80 Assembly Meter and Z80 instruction set extensions," explains Robert. "The SjASMPLUS cross compiler is used. Level planning and creation uses Tiled, with Python scripts to export level data."

Robert's plan is for twelve levels split into four zones, increasing in size and difficulty. At the end of each zone, the player must defeat a boss. "The aim is to have *The Tower* completed and ready for release in Q4 2026, hopefully in time for Crash! Live 2026 – via download, and physically via Technoshed," says Robert. </BODY>

<!--- [SPECTRUM NEXT] THE GRAPHICS IN THE DEMO BUILD ARE ROBERT'S, WITH THE HERO RIDING A MOVING PLATFORM ABOVE THE ELECTRICITY. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

NO MORE PHYSICAL MEDIA

The team discuss Sony's recent intention to stop making physical games

DARRAN JONES

MARTYN CARROLL

TIM EMPEY

On 1 July, Sony announced it would no longer make physical discs and would stop production across all its consoles in 2028. Needless to say, the news has not gone down very well, both in the wider world and at **Retro Gamer** Towers…

DARRAN

So, were you surprised when Sony announced its plans to drop physical media?

MARTYN

Like a lot of people I was amazed. A bit shocked even. But mostly disappointed. I mean, I guessed it would happen at some point in the future, maybe in five or ten years from now, but not with PS6, which we're guessing will be out in a couple of years.

> "Collecting modern games still appeals massively to me, especially when it's a game in a series I'm invested in"
> MARTYN CARROLL

TIM

I was, it just didn't seem to be something on my radar, and this is coming from someone who only has an Xbox Series S.

DARRAN

To be fair, I've been expecting this since the end of the PS3 generation but I selfishly thought it wasn't going to be while I was still into my games. How do we think Sony has handled the reaction from gamers?

MARTYN

I think the silence speaks volumes. I don't think Sony is surprised by the reaction though. I reckon it fully expected it, and is just riding it out until we forget about it and move on to something else.

TIM

You mean like Sony's new LX3 vinyl turntable?

MARTYN

Oh ha yes. Unfortunate timing with that reveal, promoting the benefits of physical media.

DARRAN

Admittedly it's another department, but even so, that's some incredibly poor marketing, particularly when there's likely to be crossover within the two markets. The fact that customers are still complaining in the official blog posts speaks volumes. So can we see the others following this strategy?

TIM

Yeah definitely, *GTA VI* is digital, and doesn't Nintendo prefer download codes over game carts these days?

MARTYN

Ah *GTA VI*. That announcement pre-empted Sony's announcement. I find it inconceivable to think that when *GTA VI* comes out, it won't be possible to by a physical copy of the game on disc. That just seems unreal.

TIM

First they came for our game manuals, and I said nothing…

» [PlayStation 4] It's impossible to re-download *PT*, so if it's not sitting on your PS4's hard drive, you're out of luck.

DARRAN

But that's the thing Tim, none of those savings were passed on to consumers and we still accepted it. Do we expect games to come down in price once the only way you can potentially buy them is through an online console store?

MARTYN

The prices will go up, without a doubt. With no competition from physical sales, and particularly second-hand sales, they can charge what they want.

TIM

I'm not sure what the last game I bought at full price was, *Dragon's Dogma II* probably (and hopefully the *Dark Arisen* version sorts that game out). I just keep eyeing the sales, I want the second part of the *Final Fantasy VII* remake and right now it's 40% off bringing it to £29.99, but even that seems

» [PlayStation 5] While figures haven't been announced yet, *Grand Theft Auto VI*'s preorders certainly don't seem to be suffering from being a digital-only game.

» [Switch 2] Game-Keys are being used by third-party publishers to save on expensive storage, so kudos to Bethesda, as *Indiana Jones And The Great Circle* is complete on the cartridge.

» [PC] Licensed games like the *Jurassic Park Classic Games Collection* will be hit hard. Some have been known to leave an online store within six months of getting released!

too much. Back when I had the Xbox 360 and Xbox One I used to get in a cycle of buying a full-price game then trading it in for diminishing returns until I had to get another full-price game. Those days are gone, especially after I got the Series S.

MARTYN

Collecting modern games still appeals massively to me, especially when it's a game in a series I'm invested in. Say something like *Tomb Raider*, *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill*. I have every one of those games, so it would be gutting not to be able to add future entries. There would be a gap on the shelf that can't really be filled.

DARRAN

So what will you do Martyn when a new *Silent Hill* comes out and it looks amazing and it's only on PS7 or Xbox Series3.14?

MARTYN

I suppose I will cave in and get it. I hope it might become like movies, when if you really want to see a film, you go to the cinema on opening night. But if you want to own it, you wait

» [PlayStation 3] *After Burner: Climax* is another game lost to history because it was only ever digital, and has been long since been delisted.

» [PlayStation 5] You'll be hard-pressed to find the PS5 launch game *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* in shops at its original price due to intense competition. But what happens to prices when there is no competition?

PS4
THE LAST OF US PART II
ELLIE EDITION
DIGITAL CONTENTS*
PS4™ DYNAMIC THEME
PLAYSTATION™NETWORK AVATARS (SET OF 8)
DIGITAL SOUNDTRACK
DIGITAL MINI ART BOOK FROM DARK HORSE
PRE-ORDER AND RECEIVE THE FOLLOWING IN-GAME ITEMS AT LAUNCH:
AMMO CAPACITY UPGRADE
CRAFTING TRAINING MANUAL*
THE LAST OF US PART II
STEELBOOK CASE WITH FULL GAME · 12" ELLIE STATUE · 48 PAGE MINI ART BOOK FROM DARK HORSE · ELLIE'S BACKPACK · ELLIE'S BRACELET · THE LAST OF US PART II LOGO PATCH
LITHOGRAPH ART PRINT AND THANK YOU LETTER · 7" VINYL RECORD FEATURING MUSIC FROM THE ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK · SET OF 5 STICKERS · SET OF 6 ENAMEL PINS
IN DEVELOPMENT FOR THE PLAYSTATION®4 SYSTEM.
NAUGHTY DOG

» Will expensive Collector's Editions be as desirable to gamers when they're only receiving a digital code with their extras?

for the 4K release a few months later. If games were similar in the future, I could live with that. And I suppose that's where boutique publishers can step in.

TIM

But what are you going to play them on?

DARRAN

I've been happily buying Steam games for ages now and am used to buying digital games, but they're often dirt cheap, which will be in stark contrast to what things will cost on future consoles.

MARTYN

I don't see why Sony can't follow what it did with the PS5 Pro. That was only available as a digital console, but if you wanted a drive, you bought it separately. Perhaps Sony could even open the door to supporting third-party optical drives, like they have with SSD drives.

DARRAN

Well I guess there's still time that Sony can change its mind, but that's looking less and less likely. I guess I picked the wrong time to start selling off my retro games…

TIM

Yeah, won't they be worth so much more in the future? I wonder how much *Spec Ops: The Line* goes for these days?

MARTYN

If Sony doesn't change its mind I'm going back to my Spectrum. *

» The PlayStation 5 Pro doesn't come with a built-in disc drive, but there's at least the option to buy one.

READERS REACT

Will you buy a console if games are digital only?

Ryan

I don't know yet. What I DO know is that I don't want that, and the corporations making these decisions think that digital is a lock, but I promise you it isn't. Plus, my backlog is so big anyway I could survive on just that.

Jason Williams

I buy videogames for the game content, not for the boxed slab of plastic that it comes on. I haven't bought a physical game in nearly ten years.

zebrachair

It will depend on what subscription offerings are available. I'm unlikely to spend £60-£70 on a single digital code for something I don't own and for which access might be restricted in the future. I'm not against paying £10-£15 per month to access an ever-changing digital catalogue of games.

OxGeek

Probably not. Certainly not unless prices drop quite a bit. I barely buy new games on the current consoles as it is due to high prices, so won't pay similar or more for something I don't own.

MysticalMachineGun

I've become more and more of a PC gamer as I age so that would just push me further into the arms of a keyboard and mouse.

billy cupid

No. I will not pay £60-£70 for something I don't own. We should never have allowed platform holders to sell long-term rentals as 'purchases'. There should have been legislation years ago that at least forced platforms to guarantee access to purchased games forever or otherwise provide a full refund.

Sonic Yoda

No, because I'm not made of money. Hardware prices only keep climbing and the only way I can afford to buy games nowadays is if they're second hand or severely discounted.

Shane Powell

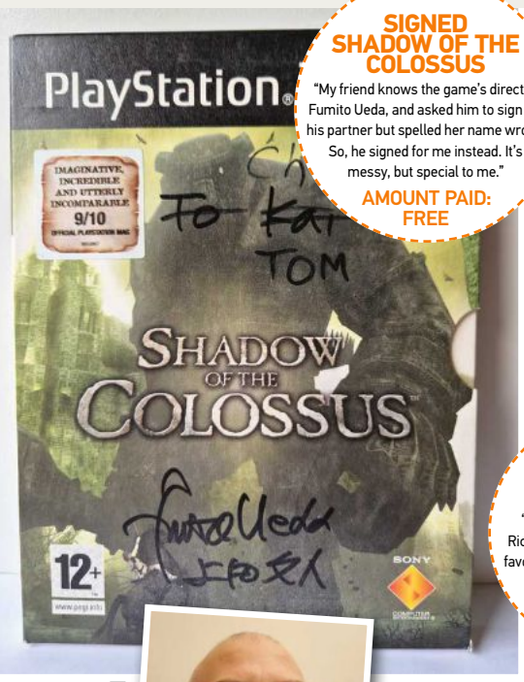
I am not against digital only because I have used Steam since the beginning and it's never been an issue. I do not really see the point in owning anything other than a Nintendo console as a partner to PC at this point though. Nintendo are the only company that have something you can't get on PC.

Stringy

I've been on Xbox Series S for a few years now and it doesn't bother me at all. What I do fear for is the younger generation who will miss out on hoarding the physical copies of games of their youth to reminisce when they are my age.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

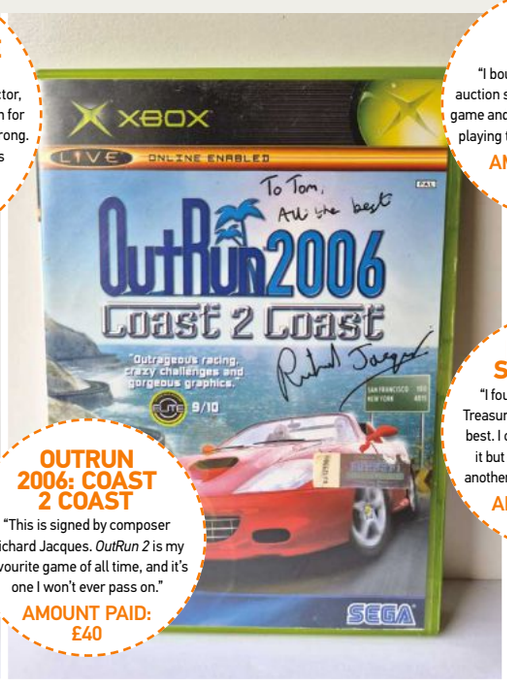
READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**



SIGNED SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

"My friend knows the game's director, Fumito Ueda, and asked him to sign for his partner but spelled her name wrong. So, he signed for me instead. It's messy, but special to me."

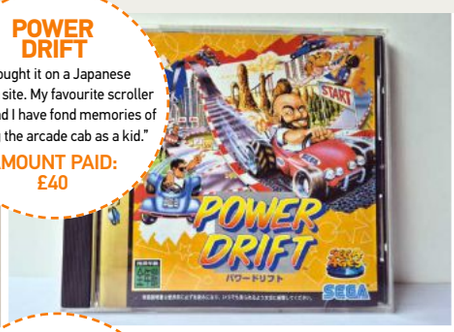
AMOUNT PAID: FREE



OUTRUN 2006: COAST 2 COAST

"This is signed by composer Richard Jacques. *OutRun 2* is my favourite game of all time, and it's one I won't ever pass on."

AMOUNT PAID: £40



POWER DRIFT

"I bought it on a Japanese auction site. My favourite scroller game and I have fond memories of playing the arcade cab as a kid."

AMOUNT PAID: £40

RADIANT SILVERGUN

"I found this on eBay. I love Treasure, and this is one of their best. I owned it before and sold it but wish I'd kept it, so I got another copy a few years back."

AMOUNT PAID: £179

BIO

NAME:
TomFum

LOCATION:
Milton Keynes

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
Approx £9,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Saturn

FAVOURITE GAME:
OutRun 2

YOUTUBE:
@GameOlder2024

RISING SUN GAMING

TomFum loves shopping in Japan for rarities to add to his collection

Words by Faith Johnson

Tom, known affectionately as TomFum, is a keen import gamer, but he started his gaming journey on Eighties computers. "My introduction to gaming was the Dragon 32, and then the ZX Spectrum +2," he begins. "But it wasn't until the Mega Drive that my passion for gaming stepped up a level. It blew my mind and cemented my love for Sega. I've fond memories playing *Altered Beast*, *Revenge Of Shinobi* and *Super Monaco GP*. Later, I discovered import games, and seeing *Sonic* for the first time was something else."

This newfound love led Tom to start collecting games as he got older. "Around the time the Dreamcast came out, I started remembering the games Sega released and what I played as a child," we're told. "So, I started collecting around 2002. I built a big collection of everything Sega, all the consoles, including a Mega-CD, which I always wanted. Sadly, around 2007, I sold my collection for financial reasons, but I still had the odd console. It wasn't until 2018 that I started collecting seriously again."

Tom's collection is filled with Japanese games, and we ask him what he looks out for when shopping there. "I import a lot, mainly because it's cheaper than buying from eBay at home," he explains. "I look for games I always wanted as a kid and don't really buy rare games as I'm not interested in that. If a rare game comes up, and it's also a good game, then I may pick it up. But condition is the most important aspect for me, as I like games to be in good condition. Hence why I buy from Japan, as they tend to look after their stuff."

Like most collectors, Tom has had a few deals in his time as well. "I've had two absolute bargains. One was the Dreamcast *Samba de Amigo* maracas set in mint condition from Japan that only cost £5. I couldn't believe it as I had seen the UK version in CEX for £250. I also scored a Facebook Marketplace lot for £40. There were three Xbox 360s, an OG Xbox, a PS2, and a PlayStation, with a bundle of games. I made my money back and then some after selling on."

There's lots of variety present in Tom's collection, and we ask what some of his favourite games are. "I love *Out Run* and own various copies of *OutRun 2* and a copy of *Coast 2 Coast* signed by Richard Jacques, whom I met back in 2008," he says. "I also collect variants of *Rez* for the Dreamcast."

We finish by asking Tom what Grails he would like to add to his collection. "My first would be the original Sega Wondermega. It was one I saw as a kid in *Mean Machines* magazine and really fell in love with. Secondly, I have reproductions of the *Battle Mania* games on Mega Drive, and I'd love to own the originals. When I was last in Japan, I should've picked up the first game but didn't. I don't know why, but I find them so fun and love the art style of them. They aren't cheap though." ✱

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com retrogamermag.bsky.social

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

BORDER DOWN LIMITED EDITION

■ "I found this while on holiday with my mum on my first visit to Japan in 2013. Purchased from Super Potato Akihabara. A fantastic game that reminds me of a special holiday."

AMOUNT PAID: £125

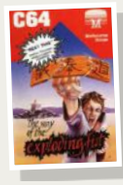
BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG (MEGA DRIVE)

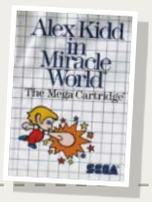
You won't need to save all your rings to grab this classic, as complete copies cost **£6.** Loose carts can be bought for around **£1.50.**



THE WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST (C64)

There's no need for your wallet to explode, as good-condition copies will cost **£10.** Poor condition can be bought for under **£5.**

ALEX KIDD IN MIRACLE WORLD (MASTER SYSTEM)



There's no kidding around with this classic, as complete copies cost between **£50** and **£100** depending on condition. The high cost is likely due to the fact that so many owned it as a pack-in game.

ROLLER COASTER (ZX SPECTRUM)

There are no ups and downs to worry about for collectors, as this classic Elite game regularly sells in complete condition for **£7.**

PRINCE OF PERSIA (SNES)

Complete copies can cost as much as **£100,** condition dependent. But loose carts are often found for under **£20.**

GRAND THEFT AUTO (PLAYSTATION)

Complete copies of Rockstar's classic can be had for a steal, ranging from **£10** to **£25** depending on condition. Be sure to check that the map is included.

FORBIDDEN SIREN (PLAYSTATION 2)

Your wallet may be frightened by paying **£100** for a copy, although poorer-quality copies can be bought for around **£70** if you're patient.

SOULCALIBUR II (GAMECUBE)

Shop prices for this stay steady at **£13,** so fans of Link won't need to splash the cash. Savvy savers may wish to wait for an auction as it rarely passes **£10.**

UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE (PLAYSTATION 3)

You certainly won't need a small fortune to enjoy Nathan Drake's original adventure, as most copies sell for **£3,** with mint copies costing no more than **£10.** Alternatively, *Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection* can be found on PS4 for under a tenner.

HOW MUCH?!

SING IT: HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL 3 (XBOX 360)

This Xbox *Sing It* game sold for staggering **£4,600** at a recent auction. The PAL port was recalled after production and is a grail for 360 collectors as a result.

Prices correct at time of print

» [PC] Lighting sticks of dynamite and lobbing them at enemies is dangerous, but fun.

IN THE KNOW

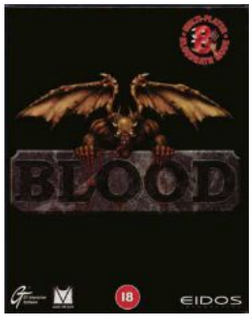
» **PUBLISHER:** GT INTERACTIVE / EIDOS INTERACTIVE

» **DEVELOPER:** MONOLITH

» **PLATFORM:** PC

» **RELEASE:** 1997

» **PRICE TODAY:** £200+



» [PC] The anachronistic aerosol flamethrower, possibly inspired by James Bond in *Live And Let Die*.

BLOOD

Developed by Monolith, buoyed by the success of Duke Nukem 3D, Blood represents the last commercial breath of the 2.5D Build Engine. Expect violence, deadpan humour and… blood. Lots of blood

Words by Graeme Mason

THE GAME

Rising from the grave is Caleb, a Wild West gunslinger with revenge on his mind. His target: the demon Tchernobog, who betrayed Caleb and his fellow cult leaders, slaughtering them in a fit of pique. Now, Caleb lives, again, and begins his hunt, tracking down the demon while killing anything that foolishly stands in his way.

Apparently set in the early 20th century (the time period is never entirely made clear), *Blood* is a first-person shooter with an occult theme. Caleb wields a variety of weaponry, some of it anachronistic, most notably a spray can that he uses as a makeshift flamethrower. A flare gun and stick of dynamite are more contemporary, as is the up-close-and-personal starting weapon, the pitchfork. Simple, but deadly.

The human enemies consist of robed cult members and fanatics, armed with shotguns or Tommy guns. Caleb must also contend with the macabre beings of Tchernobog, such as zombies, gargoyles, hellhounds and, in a nod to Thing from *The Addams Family*, a possessed hand that leaps up at his throat.

As its title succinctly suggests, *Blood* is not a game for the squeamish, albeit with a wicked sense of dark humour. Caleb is never short of a pithy comment ("They're gonna need a bucket and mop when I'm done with you!"), with the blood and viscera of dispatched enemies raining down on the grizzled warrior. And you'll never forget the screams of a cultist once ignited by a shot from Caleb's flare gun.

THE QUALITY

Released in the spring of 1997 as shareware, the full version of *Blood* followed in the summer, and considering it trailed in the wake of the all-conquering 3D FPS *Quake*, press reaction to the Monolith game was largely positive. Most outlets focussed on praising its unbridled mayhem and offbeat, if derivative, humour, while the technical aspect inevitably came under scrutiny. "*Blood* is damn enjoyable to play," noted *PC Zone*'s David McCandless, "Its engine and technology may smack you as being somewhat cheap and nasty… but it does possess a certain charm and a certain smoothness." Over at *PC Zone*'s fierce UK rival, *PC Gamer*, the acclaim was a little more muted, not just over the tech,

» [PC] This zombie, a staple supernatural enemy, is about to get forked up.

but its gameplay. "How many keys do you have to use?" muttered the magazine's reviewer, Edward James. "Playing *Blood* after extended *Quake*-oholism feels horrible." A final score of 62% summarised *PC Gamer*'s feelings, while stateside, *GamePro* was notably more generous, giving *Blood* a 4/5 score.

WHY IT'S EXPENSIVE

Big boxes ruled the PC games market in 1997. They looked amazing on the shelves of stores, gleaming brightly, each one housing the game's CD, instruction manual and, often, more. Sadly, even a medium-sized games collection would take up a ridiculous amount of room, leaving many gamers with no choice but to bin or recycle the cardboard box, meaning boxed copies, especially those unbattered by the passing of time, fetch a high price online. Sales-wise, *Blood* was a moderate hit, boosted by its Gothic and gory theme, yet restricted by the 2.5D Build Engine, which looked especially antiquated against id's *Quake*. Another factor could be its exclusivity – despite plans for Saturn and PlayStation versions, *Blood* never made it off the PC, at least back in the Nineties. Nevertheless, it has a considerable cult following today, as demonstrated by Nightdive's remaster. After all, how many other games do you get to massacre opponents with a voodoo doll and pin?

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES

You can easily experience the dark and destructive delights of *Blood* on your PC today thanks to Nightdive's remaster, *Blood: Refreshed Supply*. Available on PC, Xbox, PS4/PS5 and Nintendo Switch, it's a superb update that includes the add-ons, *Plasma Pak* and *Cryptic Passage*. If you're after something similar, but with a modern twist, you're also in luck. Boomer shooters are proving popular in the indie market today, with Jasozz Games' *Cultic* thoroughly evoking the supernatural chaos of *Blood*. On a similar note is *Dusk*, released back in 2018, and *Blood West*, in which you play an undead gunslinger out for revenge. All of these are good options if you like your hands bloody.

» [PC] Caleb prepares to set a fanatic on fire.

» [PC] Squeeze the Life Leech and watch an enemy wither before your eyes.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There's no getting around the fact that the original *Blood* is not a cheap game to buy, despite its regular appearance on auction sites. Factor in the add-ons, and you're talking some serious money. Fortunately, the continued sterling efforts of Nightdive Studios make it simple enough to experience the Monolith game today, and if you do happen to have enough coins to purchase the original – well, damn, that large, shiny box will look great on your shelf. ✱

I'VE GOT IT!

Readers celebrate their Blood boxes

Sotiris Voyiatzoglou
I finally got the full version last year, but with a big surprise: the Greek variant. It has the US box art and fully translated text in Greek, the fat EU jewel case with the gargoyle and the two discs (game and music video disc).

Lars Schade
I think I bought the big box as an import here in Germany for 70-80 DM, two or three months after the release. The import version was (as always in these times) put on the index list.

Superzazad
I live in France, and I got it in 2022 for around €70. I bought it on Leboncoin, which is a Marketplace in France.

Stuart Feldhammer
I have the game in a box and think it's very cool but have never played it too far. But I subscribe to **Retro Gamer**... it's a truly awesome magazine!

Snuggsy187
I can't remember where I got it, but I had to contact Eidos as it turned out I had a bugged version. They sent a replacement! It still gets played around Halloween time! Maranax infirmux!

Pallette Swap Millennial
I picked it up at CompUSA or Best Buy (they were neighbours) it was probably on close out because I only paid $20.

» Reader Giuseppe Papa has great taste in first-person shooters, and magazines.

THE RETRO SHELF

Andrew Fisher reveals how he wrote multiple retro books

started writing about the Commodore 64 in the Nineties, appearing in the pages of *Commodore Force* and *Commodore Format*. Back then, I wanted to write a book about the computer, but the closest I got was writing the foreword for a book on machine code – as my *Commodore Force* persona, Professor Brian Strain.

Fast-forward to the Noughties and I became a regular contributor to **Retro Gamer**. It was in 2007 that I finally got the chance to write my book. Andrew Rollings had set up Hiive Publications to produce his title, *The ZX Spectrum Book 1982-199x*, covering over 200 classic games. I approached Andrew and suggested I could write the C64 equivalent. That took about a year, with an intensive two months spent on polishing and rewriting text. I was very happy with the outcome. Jerry Ellis would follow with *The 8-Bit Book*, looking at other 8-bit machines. The planned Amiga book was sadly never finished. I later collaborated with Jerry on *Arcade Imperfect*, published through his Golem Books, looking at how good or bad arcade conversions were on home computers.

History repeated itself in 2020. Graeme Mason announced his book *ZX Nightmares*, to be published through Fusion Retro Books (fusionretrobooks.com), and I put myself forward for the C64 equivalent. Writing that one took about six months and established the format. Each entry gets two pages, the first with a cover scan and four screenshots showing various parts of the game. Then, the text itself is roughly 300-320 words, focussing on how it plays, trivia about the creation or the company, and extracts from contemporary reviews (mainly from *Zzap!64* in my case). The designer grabs sprites or images from the screens and expands them as page decoration.

Having put ourselves through playing over 200 bad games, Graeme followed up with *ZX Dreams*, dedicated to the computer's best games. In 2025, Fusion published my *C64 Dreams*, which is still on sale. Graeme has released *ZX Dreams 2*, while my *C64 Dreams 2* is being designed and laid out for the Kickstarter. Graeme and I have survived signing large numbers of books for the backers. Graeme has started on *ZX Nightmares 2*, and the plan is to follow with *C64 Nightmares 2*. Amstrad fans may feel left out, but designer Ben Honebone and I have pitched the idea of an *Amstrad Nights* book with a mixture of good and bad games.

> "I have survived signing large numbers of books for the backers"

have had the chance to sell my books at Zzap!Live events. At the 2026 event, I was raising money for Crohn's & Colitis UK by asking for a donation in return for my signature. I raised more than £100 that weekend, which goes to research and support. I have Crohn's, which has deeply affected my life and has meant undergoing major surgeries.

I usually start these book projects with a spreadsheet. First, I compile a long list of potential game names, with the publisher and year of release stored as separate fields. If there is a *Zzap!* review, that gets entries for the score, issue, and page number, plus a direct web link to zzap64.co.uk, the brilliant site for everything to do with the classic magazine. These are then sorted into categories with a code – LL for Lovely/Lousy Licence, or SW/SA for Simply Wonderful/Simply Awful as examples. The Notes column is used for other review scores and points of interest. I play the games, grabbing multiple screenshots without filter or scanlines. Then I write the text. All the little nuggets of trivia I have accumulated over the years of reading about and playing games go in. Good friends at Lemon64 (lemon64.com) and GameBase64 (gb64.com) provide the cover scans.

What comes next? I have started work on *C64 Nightmares 2*, with my spreadsheet almost finished and the games chosen. I have almost finished writing *The Little Book Of SNES Games* for Fusion, which has been fun. I've also plans for a volume of poetry on gaming and technology, currently titled *Pixel Poetry*, which I will intend to self-publish through my website c64books.co.uk

I hope to reissue *The Commodore 64 Book 1982-199x* in an updated form (with design changes and revised text) as both an eBook and a physical book at some point as well. And the long-term plan is to write the sequel, tentatively titled *The Commodore 64 Book 199x-2027*, covering the wonderful homebrew that has emerged since 2007 (and more games from 1990 onwards that missed the first book). But I still need to find time to keep writing for **Retro Gamer**... ✱

BIBLIOGRAPHY

KEY BOOK TITLES I'VE BEEN INVOLVED IN

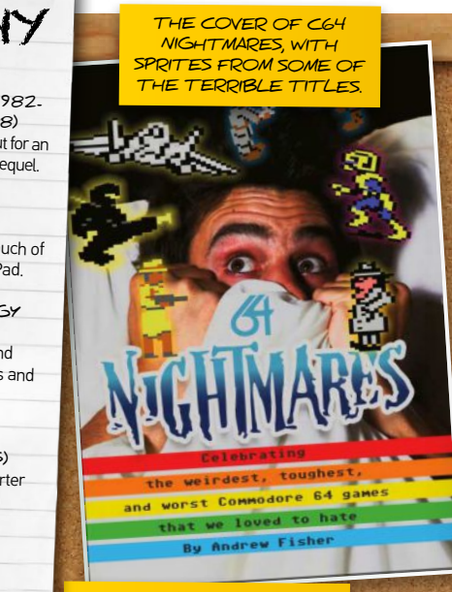
THE COMMODORE 64 BOOK 1982-19XX (HIIVE PUBLISHING, 2008)
I am immensely proud of my first book. Watch out for an updated version (print/digital) and the planned sequel.

ARCADE IMPERFECT (GOLEM BOOKS, 2021)
I had a lot of fun working with Jerry on this; much of my writing and research was done on an iPad.

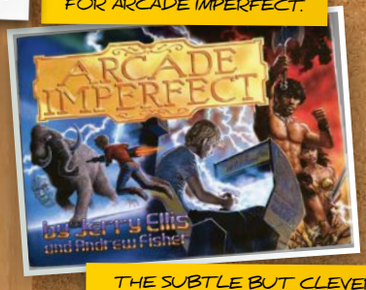
SUPER NINTENDO ANTHOLOGY (GEEKS-LINE, 2021)
I wrote over 700 game reviews in a year and conducted interviews with famous developers and musicians for this project.

C64 DREAMS (FUSION RETRO BOOKS, 2025)
Seven days after signing books for the Kickstarter backers, I ended up in hospital needing two more surgeries.

PSYGNOSIS – TOME ONE (EDITIONS 64K, 2025)
This is the first of three books on the company's history, which I am helping with fact-checking and proofreading.

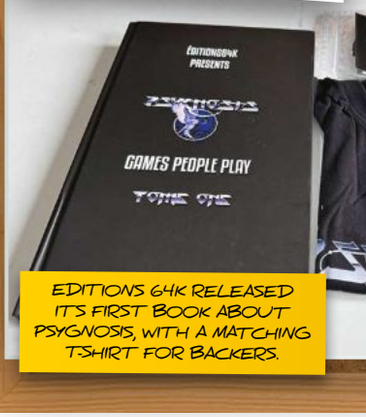


THE COVER OF C64 NIGHTMARES, WITH SPRITES FROM SOME OF THE TERRIBLE TITLES.



THE LATE OLI FREY PAINTED A SUPERB COVER FOR ARCADE IMPERFECT.

THE SUBTLE BUT CLEVER COVER OF THE COMMODORE BOOK 1982-199X, DESIGNED BY ANDREW ROLLINGS.



EDITIONS 64K RELEASED ITS FIRST BOOK ABOUT PSYGNOSIS, WITH A MATCHING T-SHIRT FOR BACKERS.

SELLING AND SIGNING MY BOOKS AT ZZAPLIVE 2026. PHOTO CREDIT: MIKE MEE.

I HELPED PROOFREAD 2016'S HINTS & TIPS FOR VIDEOGAME PIONEERS BY ANDREW HEWSON.

MY PERSONAL COPY OF C64 DREAMS, ON A TABLE AT CAMBRIDGE'S CENTRE FOR COMPUTING HISTORY.

THE SPREADSHEET IN PROGRESS FOR C64 NIGHTMARES 2, WITH COMPLETED TEXTS IN ORANGE.

SUPER NINTENDO ANTHOLOGY FROM GEEKS. LINE WAS AVAILABLE IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH.

WEARING MATCHING SHIRTS TO THE MEETING, I AGREED TO HELP JERRY ELLIS WITH ARCADE IMPERFECT.

READER'S REACT

You share your favourite retro books with us

Craig Grannell
The Games That Weren't (Frank Gasking for Bitmap Books) for giving us a stellar peek into the many fantastic titles that almost made it – and for being built like you could fend off a surprise ninja attack with the thing.

A37927
Queremos su dinero: El hombre tras Amstrad España (*We Want Your Money: The Man Behind Amstrad Spain*) by Jesús Martínez del Vas, chronicles the brand's business journey in Spain. A brilliant story from the Eighties not to be forgotten.

Retrospilling.no
I like *8-bitar på 80-talet* (8-bits *In The 80s – Nintendo's Entry In Swedish Homes*) by Martin Lindell. It's a special and very interesting story about why Nintendo came early to Sweden and Scandinavia.

Packobilly
I really enjoyed *El Libro De Los Videojuegos De Terror* (*The Book Of Horror Videogames*) by Adrián Hernán de Sales.

The Kinsie
On account of its immaculately detailed coverage of a forgotten era: *The Secret History Of Mac Gaming (Expanded Edition)* by Richard Moss.

Jason
I love the Amiga, so it has to be Bitmap Books' *Commodore Amiga: A Visual Compendium*. Brings back so many fun memories. But also brings back regrets of the many games that passed me by.

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a copy of one of our classic retro books from our archives. Good luck everyone!

» [PSP] It's great to see younger gamers like Zack enjoying the PSP. If he hasn't got it yet, we recommend *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite*.

ON THE HUNT

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Thank you, your magazine regularly brings back fond memories for me when you discuss consoles and games. My son Zack has recently widened his gaming collecting past the current generation with a look to collect for Sony's PSP (great to have issue 262 to reference) and so we've also started looking for game shops (not just CEXs, Cash Generators etc) across the North West that we can visit. It is amazing how much fun looking for, discussing and playing retro games together is, and your magazine helps inspire this. We're also keeping an eye out for gaming markets thanks to Darran's My Retro Life story in issue 285.

My one ask from the magazine would be for more articles or looks at the locations where gamers can go to physically experience retro games without the shopping aspect. Zack and I have had great times visiting places such as the North West Computer Museum (Leigh), Arcade Club (Bury), and Power Up! (Manchester's Museum Of Science And Industry). Although emulation has seen games come to current consoles and computers, there is still a different type of magic in playing titles such as Konami's *X-Men* on the original six-player cabinet.
Kind regards,
Gary Pickup

Thanks so much for writing in Gary and it's great to see you sharing your passion with your son. We like the idea of a 'Visit These Locations' article. Maybe we could turn it into a monthly feature. Leave it with us.

I HAVE ISSUES

Dear **Retro Gamer,**
I am sure that I can't be your only reader in this situation – given how lots of us struggle to get rid of old things – but I now have 270 issues of **Retro Gamer** taking up a very large amount of space!

Realistically, I am not going to ever read through these again and, whilst the spines are lovely on the shelves, I really need to find a new home for them.

Any ideas on what's best? Would libraries take them, do you think? I suppose I could take them to the boot fair, but that feels like a lot of effort...
Kind regards,
Robin Boyns

Our first thought is to say keep them forever, but we know how much space 270 issues of the magazine takes up. (Darran has so many issues that he used to have dreams of being crushed by 20-years worth of work.) Your best bet is to see if there's a local game museum that would be interested in them, as we're sure their visitors would enjoy reading them as much as you did.

» Places like the Retro Computer Museum are always looking for donations. You can find out more at retrocomputermuseum.co.uk/#donate

STAR LETTER

RG AND ME

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
This year is the 20th anniversary of me discovering and becoming a subscriber to your magazine. My wife and I started the process of IVF and in May 2006 the big day arrived where my wife would have a procedure to remove the eggs and fertilisation would begin. Well, I had a couple of hours to kill wandering around Clifton in Bristol while my wife was having the procedure. As you can imagine the man gets the easy bit (as my wife tells me).

On my walk I found a newsagent and bought a copy of **Retro Gamer**. I think this was issue 24 with Monty Mole on the cover. I remember walking to Brandon Hill (where you can find Cabot Tower, that when climbed, gives great views of the city) and sitting on a bench worrying, contemplating the future and reading my new magazine.

The IVF was a success and our son was born the following January. From that moment **Retro Gamer**, for me, became forever emotionally linked to the IVF, my wife's pregnancy and birth of my son. We had another two attempts at IVF with the second failing but the third succeeding and giving us a girl. Now to the annoyance of my wife both my kids love playing videogames but unfortunately not retro games.
Cheers
Stacey King

What a heart-warming story to share with fellow readers, Stacey. We're so glad that the magazine has had a positive impact on your life and it's great to hear your children are enjoying games. And don't worry, there's still time to get them into retro gaming. Maybe a bookazine will help.

» Wil Overton's artwork for this issue was amazing. No wonder it caught Stacey's eye in the shop.

CONTACT US

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» Darran is running low on binders and came up with his own solution.

IN A BIND

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I'm just enquiring as to whether there is any intention from Future to make more binders. They're all sold out and have been for some time on the website and I really need a storage solution as I've been a regular subscriber for some years and I'm seriously considering cancelling now over this due to a lack of storage solutions for said magazine.
Regards,
James Wilson

Hi James, thanks for writing in. There aren't currently any plans to print new binders, but you're not the only person to ask. Leave it with us and we'll see what options are available.

A SNES SHMUP FAN SPEAKS OUT

Hi dudes!
Even though four excellent shmups were featured in the SNES Companion (*R-Type III*, *Super Aleste*, *Axelay*, *UN Squadron*), Darran commented on the system saying the genre was "a little weak". I'd argue that the top four are up there with the four best on the Mega Drive and PC Engine. And then there's other good ones like *Super EDF*, *Gradius III*, *Firepower 2000*, *BioMetal*, and if you were to import you had *Parodius*, *Macross: Scrambled Valkyrie*, and *Pop'n TwinBee*. I just hope no shmup fan ever skips out on the Super Nintendo's library, as there were too many fun titles!
All your base,
Robert August de Meijer

PS: Please let us know when Darran beats *Battle Garegga*, and throw a party!

It's a fair assessment Robert, but Darran would still argue that when you put the SNES up against the Mega Drive and PC Engine its overall shmup library is severely lacking. It simply doesn't have the sheer breadth and overall quality those systems offer.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Hot Toys fever

Darran has been losing his mind due to Hot Toys dropping the Alien Queen to celebrate *Aliens*' 40th anniversary. He's been spamming Slack with pictures of it and has even managed to impress Martyn. As you'd expect for a 1:6 figure it's absolutely huge, measuring two-foot high by four-foot long. Needless to say, Darran is already working out where on Earth he's going to put it. And let's not even discuss the Power Loader that's on the way as well.

» [Playstation] Here's proof that Tim did indeed unlock the Gunblade in *Parasite Eve II*, and this is the screenshot he took back in 2005.

» [SNES] The SNES has some incredible shmups like *Axelay*, but it still can't come close to the PC Engine and Mega Drive. Sorry, Robert.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Sonic spin-off?

Distant Arcade
Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine. It's a fun and cute puzzle game that keeps you playing.

Cherry Lambrini
Sonic Spinball. The opening level is one of those that sets the tone from the off. Great music, good game mechanics and for its time, a lot of fun. Yes, it may lose its way after the first couple of levels, but for some pick up and play fun, it was one of my favourite Mega Drive games as a kid.

Juliet
I've always loved *Sonic Spinball* despite being absolutely terrible at it. There's something about flicking that little blue fella where he needs to go that's really satisfying.

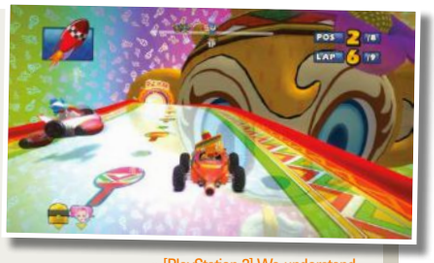
Dr no yes maybe
Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing by a looooong way. It's better than the *Mario Karts* of the time. The music, the tracks, the selection of racers were all perfect and the gameplay and controls were just superb. *Transformed* was also great but the first one for me just tops it.

Psi/Ben
They were arguably 'mainline' for me as a Game Gear kid, but it's got to be *Triple Trouble* or *Chaos*. Some great music, some dramatic bosses and lots of cool ideas spread throughout.

Enderbrace
I loved *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*, easily the best kart racer. Special mention though for *Sonic Spinball*, I loved that growing up.

bluemoon 44
I loved the challenge, level design and catchy tunes in *Sonic R* on the Sega Saturn

Shane Powell
It's got to be the original *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*. My favourite of the racing games and had the best line-up of characters. But I don't really know what's considered a spin-off really. If *Sonic Adventure* is a spin-off I would say that.



» [PlayStation 3] We understand why so many love *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, it's fantastic fun.

retro GAMER

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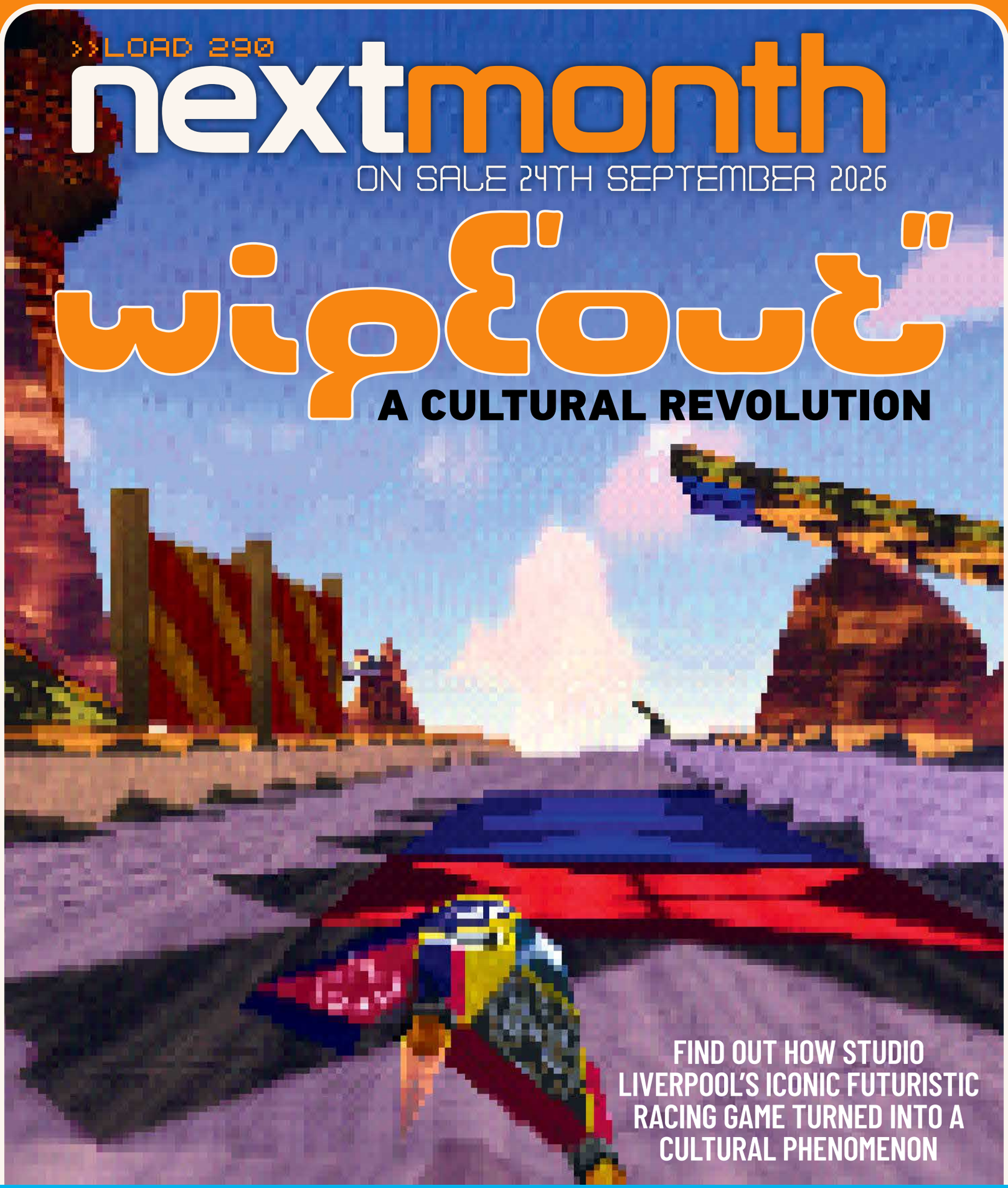

FIND OUT HOW STUDIO LIVERPOOL'S ICONIC FUTURISTIC RACING GAME TURNED INTO A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

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There's no way to lower the bridge and get across without inserting the crank into the correct slot!

Choose the slot that fits the crank shown below.

Professor Layton And The Curious Village

THE FAMILY THAT PUZZLES TOGETHER STAYS TOGETHER

» RETROREVIVAL

» NINTENDO DS » 2007 » LEVEL-5

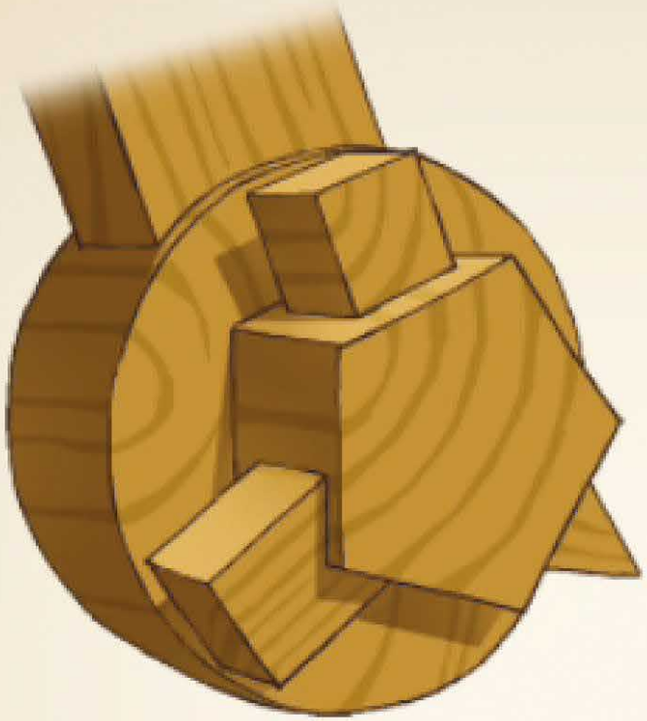
Although Nintendo's DS had multiplayer support, it's something I never really bothered with. Occasionally I'd have a few games of *Metroid Prime Hunters* or *Mario Kart 7* at work and would help out with the odd multiplayer-related review on *games™*, but we rarely played games together this way at home, despite owning more than enough devices.

And yet the first *Professor Layton* game became something that all the family played together, even though the game itself is a puzzling adventure geared towards a single player. We'd all gather around the system's two screens, reading out the story and trying to solve the game's many head-scratchers that ranged from maths-related conundrums to sliding block tasks and logic puzzles.

It proved to be a great bonding experience for the entire family, as well as giving my young daughters a chance to brush up on their maths skills. I'm not saying *Professor Layton* was responsible for them both getting into the local grammar school, but it certainly couldn't have hurt. Sometimes the puzzles would stump us all, requiring the use of one of the game's Hint Coins, but one of us would typically be able to solve it, allowing the quest of Professor Layton and his assistant Luke to continue.

When COVID-19 struck and the four of us were together again, Level-5's game proved its worth once more. This time however, instead of allowing the girls to improve their maths and general logic skills it simply acted as a useful comfort blanket providing us with something familiar when so much of what was happening in the world was largely unknown.

Weirdly, despite the fact that the first *Professor Layton* game brought us together as a family, the later games didn't have the same effect and when I took the Switch sequel away on a family caravan holiday recently, we soon got bored of its teasers and I sold it on. The original game remains in my collection however, just in case we ever need it again in the future. ✱



Tap the crank
to change
the viewing angle.

ENDGAME

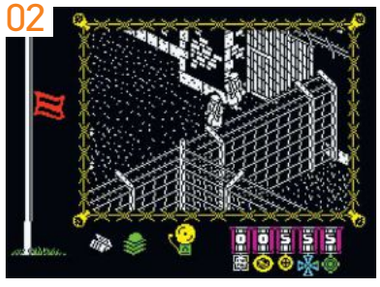
THE GREAT ESCAPE
(1986, ZX SPECTRUM)

» There are several alternative ways to break out of the POW camp in Denton Design's isometric masterpiece The Great Escape. Here we attempt the most audacious strategy – walking right out the front door with a wink and a smile

01

» For this plan to work you need to have acquired two key items: the guard's uniform and the paperwork which lets you leave and cross the border. Wait until daytime and approach the gate while wearing the uniform.

02

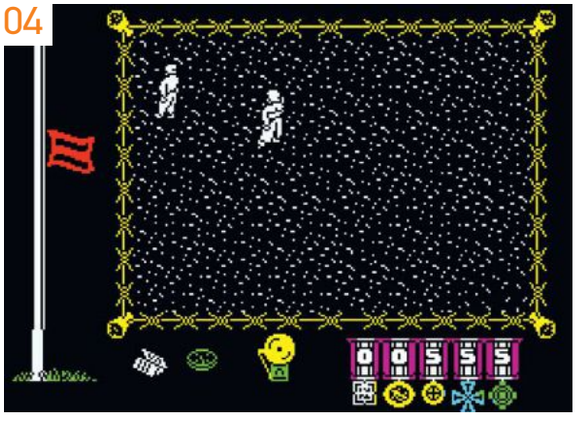


» You'll be able to pass through the gate and the guard won't bat an eyelid due to your disguise. With a "Guten tag" you're free to leg it away from camp – except the end message says that you're soon recaptured and shot.

03

» To prevent getting recaptured, you need the compass which arrives in a Red Cross parcel. You can only carry two items, so earlier you needed to have cut through the fence in the yard and dropped the compass outside.

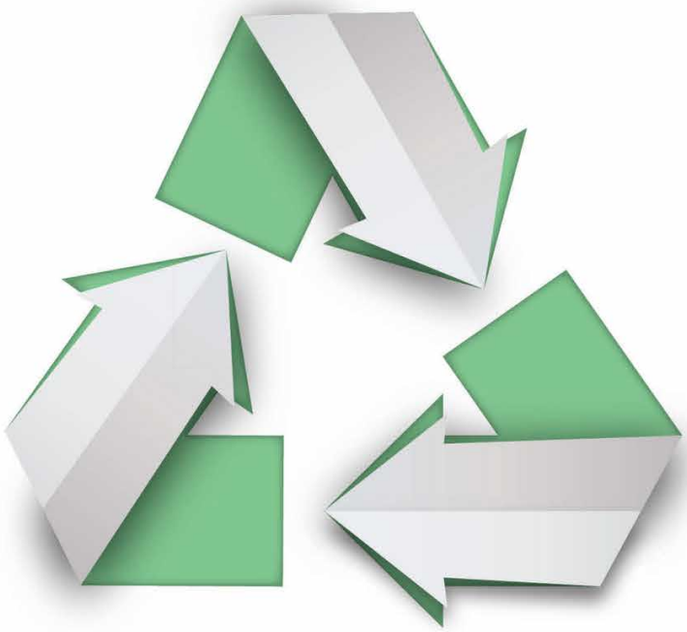
04



» As soon as you ditch the uniform and pick up the compass, the guard in the tower will signal the alarm and guards will rush towards you, ready to drag you to solitary. You can give them the run-around if you wish, but the best policy is to run off the screen sharpish.

05

» Gut gemacht! You've made it! You won't get lost as you have a compass, and you won't get recaptured as you're carrying your paperwork. You'll cross the border without a hitch and be back in dear old Blighty in time for tea. You have escaped *The Great Escape*.



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